

Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, Keynote to ADCS, July 2021

The Positive Case for Children's Service Reform

Intro

Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

This is a really important conference, particularly this year after a year like no other. When keeping children safe, supported and attending school has posed a greater challenge than ever before.

I'd like to thank you for all your fantastic work and leadership over the past 12-months.

I'd like to extend this to everyone who has gone above and beyond to maintain support for children during the most incredibly difficult time. The foster families who had to take on a whole range of other roles in the lives of children; the children homes staff staying at work for weeks on end to keep homes open and the social workers who kept going out, kept doing visits, even at the darkest and most difficult times.

I know social workers had to go into homes even when parents said they had Covid. This commitment and bravery needs to be recognised. It makes me even more determined to raise the profile of children across every corner of Government.

On a personal note, I'd also like to thank you for all the support and help you've given me since I took up this role - the support in getting out our Big Ask survey, and the many DCSs who have supported me in visits to your local areas, so I can see all the different elements of the services you oversee.

We are at a pivotal point in our journey out of the pandemic, and I want to see children put front and centre of the recovery effort – as a society we should be judged on how we support the most vulnerable and this has never been more true or important.

I know that all of you involved in ADCS have helped bring about both the SEND and Care reviews by arguing for fundamental, transformative

reforms of both systems so that we can better support the children and young people we all care about.

I think we will achieve this transformational change by celebrating the good that children's services can and do achieve for children and their families.

Today, I want to set out my approach to the role of Children's Commissioner, after a lifetime working with children in schools as a teacher, headteacher and system leader.

And – like I'm sure for you – my first response to the issues I see is to think about the children I've worked with in my career.

I was in a youth justice setting last week and it reminded me of the boys I've taught over the years – we've all worked with boys just like them, who, but for a moment, could be in the same situation. That's why it breaks my heart to see them there.

This is my motivation.

I know we could do so much better, both to stop these boys ending up there, but also when they get in there.

And this is the basis of my approach as Children's Commissioner. To celebrate everything we have done for children, and be champion relentlessly the children who aren't getting that world-class education, healthcare or social care they deserve.

I want to lay my cards on the table right now and say there are three things you can expect from me:

- 1) Challenge. I am restless to see better services for children, and that's why I will challenge you, just as I challenge Government, the health service, schools and the youth justice sector and all of us who work with and for children. The job of the Children's Commissioner is to amplify and promote the rights and voices of children and that is what I will do.
- 2) Respect. I am under no illusion about the scale of the challenges you are facing and the complexity of the systems you are leading. It is

because I respect you as senior and system leaders that I will challenge you on behalf of the children who I am here to speak up for.

- 3) But you'll also get an open door from me. I want to help you bring about change and I want to do this in collaboration. I will present to you the challenges because I want to work with you in answering them. I genuinely believe that it is in presenting solutions – not just problems – that we can attract the resources and transformation that you have all been asking for.

And this is why it was really important for me to start-off by listening to children in a broad and meaningful way.

So I launched the Big Ask survey with a bit of help from Marcus Rashford.

And I'm really pleased to be able to tell you that it has now become the biggest survey of children ever undertaken in the UK, and second only to the US census in the world in terms of responses.

An incredible 560,000 children completed the survey.

I wanted to ask children about their lives now, but also their hopes, aspirations and worries for the future.

I believe we can make sure children are not defined by what they have lost – even though what they have lost over the last year is huge – but what we give them in response.

This is a pivotal moment for society and I want to use it to tilt our politics back to thinking about children, education and the importance of all children not being defined, or their outcomes dictated, by the start they have in life. This is particularly important for those most vulnerable and disadvantaged children who need much more from us.

I want to be able to know that the services and support we are providing for every child is as good as we provide to our own children.

The Big Ask survey results will form the basis of our Childhood Commission, a year-long piece of work which will focus on the major barriers facing children today, and how we can help them have better tomorrows.

One of the challenges of running such a successful survey, is doing justice to the wealth of insights children have shared with us.

It will be no surprise to any of you to learn that children in England are positive, optimistic and kind. They care about their friends, family and communities and are passionate about the world they will be growing up in.

In September, I'll be sharing the full details of what we've learnt. Because as well as their optimism, children have also shared with us their concerns:

- feeling and being well,
- wanting more things to do within their local community
- life at home and the pressure their families are under
- and the way stress about getting a good job permeates childhood and adds to the stress children feel at school.

but today, because I'm privileged to be here with you, I want to focus on children's services.

Coming to this role from a lifetime in education, some of social care is new to me.

I know the children you are working with, and the issues they are facing. So often, schools are the interface through which issues at home come to the fore, and the teacher the first to notice when things are going wrong. This was never more apparent than during Covid, and I am so proud and pleased that we kept schools open throughout for vulnerable children. Not every country prioritised that cohort in the same way, and we must use that energy to keep driving progress.

But that does not mean I was used to social care systems or structures.

That is why it has been so helpful for me to undertake visits to so many different parts of the country.

I've been really delighted to see many different models of good practice, and the difference you are making to the lives of children.

But I've also seen the challenges facing the sector, including funding.

Overall my impression is of a system 'a system stripped of confidence, by years of forensic focus on individual tragedies and systemic failures, and too little celebration of what has been achieved'

I see this in the social workers who are not confident their interventions are helping families, right through to Government, where children's services are not afforded comparable ambition or status.

And this is a large part of the problem. Across our polity, we don't talk enough about children's services – and particularly children's social care. When we do, it is sometimes too negative.

The result is that not enough time is spent celebrating success or focusing on the good we want to achieve.

I share ADCS's desire for reform of both social care and the SEND systems and it is my fervent belief that we'll bring about that reform by focusing on what we can achieve. Vision, ambition, passion are compelling.

I know that good practice is not confined to just a few areas: there are examples of outstanding services and innovation across England. The challenge is to build on this good practice across the whole system. What children need is sustained excellence across schools, children's services and the NHS.

Obviously we need to tackle poor practice, and learn from mistakes. But international evidence repeatedly shows England's child protection system to be one of the world's safest. This is a great starting point from which to be building.

To get to the next stage, I think we need to stop looking at what's gone wrong, and look instead at where we want to go.

Because I believe it is the power of a positive narrative that can bring about the systemic reform ACDS have been calling for; the investment to make this a reality and the buy-in from partners local and national.

I was one of the first academy principals in England – number 57. And I remember, from the very offset, the one thing driving the whole process was a focus on where we wanted to be: improving outcomes. We tried new things, changed the way things were done, we did all this because we knew

where we were going. And partly because of this we were given the kind of support from government which the reforms you want to make to children's services will need.

I'm not pretending there haven't been issues on the way - but I am drawing a parallel between children's services and the early academies movement because I think we can attract the same support to children's services if we can create the same positive narrative, focus and confidence in what we are doing for children.

This needs to stretch from each family we work with, right through to system leaders in local and national Government.

My feeling is that we know we want to do- despite all the discussion of the problems in the system - there is also much consensus about the change we want to see and be.

We want to support families early, before things go wrong.

We want to work with families on a consistent basis, develop their capacity and resilience, as well as being there to make statutory and compulsory interventions in the most serious cases of abuse and neglect.

There is also almost universal acceptance that we need to provide better long-term stability for children in care. So that every child in care knows where they will be in 1-year and 5-years and feels confident in the support, love and care that will be available to them. No one should accept that 1 in 4 children in care have had three or more homes in the past two years.

And we want to break the cycle of repeated interventions with social care, stretching across the generations, with care leavers having their children removed: no one wants to see this.

The "how" to do this is a much bigger question than the "what", and much harder.

Moving to a more consensual approach to family support is not about telling social workers to be less risk averse. It comes about by empowering social workers to have confidence in what they do, it means ensuring they are supported by their team and it means getting the practical support from their partners— from housing to mental health – to help families.

Social workers need to be part of a system of support for families which is working in unison, speaking a common language and striving for a common purpose.

I have spent twenty years turning around failing schools in hard to reach areas of the country. I didn't do this by changing the teachers, but by empowering them to teach. Helping them to understand what they needed to do, and by instilling confidence in them that if they did this the system would be there to support them.

Too many social workers feel the system is working against what they are trying to do, and it is beholden all of us in this room, and the Care Review, to change this.

The same challenges apply to improving the stability of children in care. How do we get to a system with local sufficiency?

This won't be achieved by lambasting the private companies who are currently the only ones investing in new homes, but instead by designing new models of care, new methods of collaboration, and making a compelling case for this investment.

But this is a big job locally and nationally. It requires time and effort. Given the scale and spread of children's services, the number of services and relationships involved, a big challenge is creating the capacity to implement reforms at scale and at pace.

This is about leadership in the broadest sense, and a big question is whether we've got enough capacity, across the system, to support you in bringing this about. We need to think here about the capacity within local authorities, and the role of central Government in supporting you.

I know how running a MAT enabled me to support my small primary schools through challenges like getting mental health support, or dealing with Covid. But I also know how important the support from central Government was in opening my first academy.

Whenever we have had NHS reforms, they have been accompanied by transformation funding. If we are going to have SEND and social care

reform, then we need the same funding. I want to come back to funding later.

We have to look at new ways of working and how the voluntary sector, schools and social enterprises can assist local authorities in doing this.

Of course, the care review has an important role here in bringing about the conditions to support these changes.

This means building momentum for change within Government, so that we can attract the resources and wider support needed.

I think the review needs to locate children's social care within a wider set of services for families, that stretch beyond children's social care. There is no point in improving social work practice if mum can't get mental health support. It needs to make it clear that supporting families is a cross-Government responsibility.

Finally, it needs to consider the respective roles of local and central Government is ensuring the quality of children's services we all expect.

But it is important to remember that change will not be implemented by the review. Change will be brought about by the people in this virtual room and the teams you lead.

My offer to you today is to work with you in partnership to deliver this change.

I have a small team, but I want to use it to leverage support for reform and innovation across the system. I want to make the positive case for children's social care by focusing on what we can do well, and what this can mean for the children who need our help.

Of course, this needs resources. It needs resources to bring about the changes in the system that ADCS and others have advocated for. It needs to ensure all of children's services are put on a sustainable footing.

I am not afraid to argue for more funding for services, but we have to make a smart argument. Every spending review my team go in to bat for children's social care in the Treasury. They support the bids you are making for early help and family support.

But they always receive the same response:

For 10 years arguments for more children's social care funding have centred on the value of prevention, but for 10 years spending has been getting diverted to more and more high-end interventions.

I want to work with you to get a comprehensive answer to that challenge. To build a compelling and positive case for investing in children's services which acknowledges that system change will mean investing in early help now, while still being able to respond to acute needs.

I am happy to go in and make the argument for new family support funding, but we need to demonstrate how it will be used and what it will achieve.

I will make the case for additional capital funding, but at the same time I will expect LAs to explain why existing capital allocations haven't supported corporate parenting responsibilities.

This takes me to my final point, and the thing I want to focus on more than anything else in this role: aligning disparate systems to focus on children.

I wanted to be Children's Commissioner because I felt that education reform had gone as far it could without better integration with social care and SEND support.

We'd reached the glass ceiling.

School reform alone couldn't continue to improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable and hard to reach children without greater integration with the SEND, social care and health systems. I know this is a message not lost on you as you work to integrate these systems every day.

But my first three months in this role have re-enforced the need to do this on national level.

I am currently looking at the SEND review, the Care Review and the Integrated Care System white paper.

Three reviews. Three civil service teams. Three different service lenses. Largely the same group of children.

All of these reviews are absolutely needed but we need to put children, and their families, at the centre of them.

Integration is always seen as too difficult, too complex when looked at from the system level.

It becomes much simpler at a child level, and if we design the system around the child, integration follows.

But this requires all our different systems to be focused on the same ends, expressed in the same way. This, I believe, is the challenge we all need to rise to facilitate better buy-in from partners, attract funding, and provide practical support to those looking to integrate on the ground.

The starting point is expressing the basic things we want for all children.

First, we want all children to be safe. And it is testament to the relative success of our current safeguarding systems that we don't talk about this more.

Second, we all want children to have a healthy start in life, in a loving and nurturing home that supports their development.

Third, we want children to go to a good school. More and more children do, which is why we need to focus our collective efforts on supporting those schools which are struggling.

We want children to attend school, which is why we need to think about supporting those children and their families when this is a challenge. There is a job here for schools, CAMHS, SEND and family support.

Fourth, we want children to be able to get extra support when they need it, whether this be for SEND or mental health. Moreover, we should be aiming to provide this support where children are: in mainstream schools. Often, of course, what children really need is for their parents to get some help.

We want children to succeed in education, and that means all children should be achieving at least a Level-2, through whatever qualification route, ideally by 16 and certainly by 19.

We want children to be able to have the self-belief to avoid risky behaviours and the confidence to seek help when in dangerous situations – but that means the help needs to be there.

And when children do leave education we want them to go into a job, training or education.

Every part of the system from nursery to colleges, from maternity services to CAMHS, and every part of local authorities, have a role to play here. Each can pursue these ends themselves, but if we truly want to move the metrics on these outcomes, we need to work more in unison.

This is why I can announce today two strands of my Childhood Commission - both designed to give practical support to those looking to bring about integrated systems supporting children.

I am announcing them here because I want to work with you in achieving them.

The first strand will be about designing a set of system-wide outcome measures. I know lots of areas already use outcomes frameworks, at different levels, and we have some data from the Supporting Families database at a national level as well as the academic work which ADCS has supported.

I want to build on these to create practical proposals for a uniform set of outcome measures which will drive system cohesion and enable us to demonstrate, at a national level, the improvements to children's lives being delivered by children's social care. I also want to consider what the accountability measures should be to accompany this.

A large part of this will be thinking about how we make a reality out of the principle of safeguarding partnerships.

The 2017 Children and Social Work Act made safeguarding, in a legal sense, a shared statutory responsibility. I think shared outcomes and accountability measures can take us a step further in making this a practical reality.

And I want to work with you in doing this, in designing the metrics, and thinking about how they fit together. Again, I see this as building on the best practice which is always in place.

The second strand of work, linked to this, is to consider the role of schools, the voluntary sector and social enterprises in the provision of children's services.

How can these bodies complement the work of local authorities, provide capacity and support reform?

I want to start by focusing on the practical barriers to bringing in these bodies: data-sharing, outcome tracking, accountability, sharing of risk.

I know this is a challenge that has been laid out before. But I really believe this is a time for us to rise to it again.

And that we can achieve it.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and it is going to take the nation to rebuild this generation as we emerge from the pandemic.

For the most vulnerable, that means all of us uniting around common aims, and delivering together, to make children's lives better.

The challenge is to collectively raise our ambition, our confidence and our determination to work together to succeed for children.

To move on from talking about the problems, and start implementing the solutions.

I look forward to working with you over the coming years to do it.