

National Children and Adult Services Conference 2018

ADCS President's opening address – Wednesday 14 November

Introduction

Good morning conference. Welcome to Manchester for the 2018 national children and adult services conference. My name is Stuart Gallimore and I am this year's ADCS President. Some of you are aware I have recently had an eye operation, well my eye sight is good enough to see the look of horror in the front rows when they saw the size of my speech, rest assured the font is equally large and I promise to have you out of the hall in time for Coronation Street.

I would like to start with the picture behind me. It's the picture I see every morning when I walk into my office as does my Lead Member Cllr Tidy. It's the cover of a book that tells the life of Graham Gaskin which I read as an undergraduate. 'Gaskin' is Graham's story; Graham was a young boy from a dysfunctional family. He entered the care system, which at that time was heavy on system and lite on care. Whilst in care, Graham had a torrid experience which adversely affected his adulthood leading ultimately and tragically to his early and untimely death.

Shortly after reading the book for the first time, I qualified as a social worker and I was determined that I'd have no Grahams on my caseload, as a team manager no Grahams in my team. When I became a director, I was determined that I wouldn't have a Graham in my local authority area. I don't stand here claiming we always get it right, we don't, the mistakes we make belong to the category of conscientious error rather than an absence of care or worse still indifference.

It's becoming harder to be confident about maintaining that promise because, conference, 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. And, as any engineer will tell you, the more pressure there is in a system, the more likely it is to go wrong.

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.

Last week, we published the sixth iteration of this research using local authority data to 31 March 2018. This 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. 92% of authorities responded who in turn are responsible for 95% of our country's children and young people.

Guess what? Demand continues to increase over and above the growth in the child population. Let me give you just a flavour in case you haven't yet had chance to read the full report. There should be a graphic on the screen behind me, summarising these figures.

As at 31 March 2018, there were:

- 2.4million initial contacts
- Just under 660,000 referrals – an increase of 22% over 10 years
- Just over 400,000 children in need, of whom:
 - Approx. 68,500 children are subjects of a child protection plan; an 87% increase over a 10 year period; and
 - Approx. 75,500 are looked after children – an increase of 24% over a 10 year period
- Collectively local authorities are supporting at least 45,000 care leavers (aged 18-25), 5,150 of whom are UASC care leavers
- Is it any wonder Local Authorities overspent their budget by £816 million pounds in 2017/18?

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 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. Very few parents wilfully neglect their children, their circumstances drive it. **Poverty can and does impact upon parenting capacity.**

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, ADCS safeguarding pressures research found that 66% of children currently living in relative poverty live in working households. Let me say that again... **working households!**

Not only are we seeing food banks in every supermarket across the country, but we are also seeing food banks in schools too. Some schools have begun to provide school meals in vacation time using food donated by supermarkets, not just for pupils but whole families, other schools are providing pupils with sanitary products.

I'd like to think we live in 21st Century Britain and not Victorian England.

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 sense doesn't it to address the cycle of adult disadvantage in order to help improve outcomes for children. The unmet needs of parents are adversely impacting upon the wellbeing of their children.

Money

Just over two weeks ago, the Chancellor delivered the last budget before our putative exit from the EU. In terms of funding for children there's little to celebrate but if I were being generous of spirit, I suppose I'd say that at least it's a sort of recognition that children's services need more funding. It gives us a tiny platform, from which to build as we move into the Spending Review.

The Chancellor announced £410 million pounds for social care in 2019/20, with no further detail about how this will be shared or allocated between the desperate needs of adult social care and children's social care services. It sets us up for 152 local bun-fights. Whilst any additional funding is to be welcomed, this is nowhere near enough to plug the funding gap expected in children's services budgets next year alone, let alone longer term.

For children's social care specifically, the Chancellor announced that 20 local authorities with the highest numbers of looked after children, will share £84 million pounds over five years.

We are keen to understand how this will make a difference to THE SECTOR AS A WHOLE. If any of you end up being one of the lucky 20 councils to receive a share of that money...can I have a borrow?

We are 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 and simply not good enough. 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 different parts of government. All too often it seems the effectiveness of the bid writer is rewarded over actual need.

Just like local authorities, schools are also facing growing funding pressures. The one-off capital payment of £400 million pounds announced in the Budget for equipment and buildings, is less than has been allocated for repairing roads. This will not solve the long-term issues we see in our schools. Failing to invest in children and their education is a false economy.

So, where has the budget left us in children's services? Creeks and paddles come to mind colleagues.

We believe that local government children's services are being held to a tougher test than other parts of the public sector. Constantly asked to provide evidence that there's insufficient funding; constantly asked to explain why different LAs spend different amounts of money to achieve similar outcomes. Asked to justify whether we've made all of the efficiencies possible. And then to evidence what we'd spend extra money on IF, IF the Treasury gives it to us.

I hope that the Treasury will see the light in time for the Spending Review next year conference. **There's not enough money in the system. Full stop.**

As part of ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research we asked directors how much money they needed to fill the hole in their budget and what percentage of their overall budget that represented. Well, the deceptively simple question produced a complicated answer.

In essence, children's services in England need around £840 million pound a year, each year to 2020 to stabilise the ship alone. This does not take into account inflation, price rises nor any further growth in demand or the child population. It would not allow for re-investment in the essential preventative services that LAs have reluctantly had to begin cutting. It's easy to see how the £2 billion pounds shortfall estimated by LGA might be a conservative estimate.

Between 2010 and 2020 it is estimated that spending of early help services will have declined by 71%. This is concerning and deeply frustrating. 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! That said, it's important not to be misty-eyed about early help.

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, or effective, 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.

I mentioned earlier the 45,000 plus care leavers supported by councils across the country.

As many of you will know, it was care leavers' week recently and Minister Zahawi launched the care leavers' covenant involving many companies each of which has

pledged to offer opportunities to care leavers. This is excellent; so too is the ambition to work with universities to see what can be done to raise the numbers of care leavers going on to University. Currently only 6% do so; we can and must do better for our care leavers, they are our children.

Care leavers

I welcome the new duties for care leavers enshrined in the Children & Social Work Act 2017. Like every other DCS and Lead Member for Children in this room, I take my responsibilities as a corporate parent very seriously. Extending the cohort of care experienced young people who can ask for support from a personal advisor to the age of 25 is the right thing to do it's what we do for our own children - we want to stay in touch with our care leavers and support them as they get older. As they experience the ups and downs of life, they will inevitably have needs for support that we as corporate parents have a moral duty to respond to. Acting as corporate parents means acting as pushy parents, acting 'as if this were my child'.

The funding LAs received to help them meet the financial implications of the new responsibilities towards care leavers was inadequate. What added to our collective disappointment was the reality that these new responsibilities come on the back of a 50% reduction in local authority funding since 2010.

That's all a bit gloomy isn't it conference? Well, let me bring us back full circle to Graham (who is once again on the screen behind me...I hope) and draw my speech to a close.

Conclusion

Everyone in this room, and beyond, has a Graham-equivalent driving them to do the best job they can, stay motivated and stay optimistic.

I'm an optimist by nature and despite the untenable financial pressures in children's services and the continued rise in demand for our services and help, we are doing, frankly, a bloody good job.

I am sure that when we hear from HMCI Amanda Spielman in the next session, she will be commenting upon the fact that inspection of LA children's services are most definitely on an upward trajectory – we have several services that have been rated as 'outstanding'... which is a testament to our staff, our Lead Members, Leaders and Chief Executives.

Every DCS, every Lead Member for children's services, every Chief Exec of every council in England is not only committed to ensuring their own council's services are as good as they can be, but we are also committed to making sure that the whole sector is working together to improve outcomes for children.

Sector-led improvement is quite simply, the right thing to do. It is the way forward. ADCS, LGA, Solace and the DfE are working together on this because conference, as you know, we're stronger together.

It falls on us, local government, to be the noisy neighbours of central government, it falls on us to be the conscience of the Treasury, and it falls to us to make sure that the children, young people, their families and communities that we, the system leaders in this room, are responsible for, are getting the best possible chances and the same choices we hope for in our own families. These challenges fall on our watch - if not us, then who is going to make this a country that works for all children.

Thank you, conference. It's my pleasure now to hand over to Cllr Antoinette Bramble.