



## **ADCS President's opening address**

**National Children and Adult Services Conference 2021 (online)**

**Wednesday 24 November**

Thank you Stephen. Hello conference, I'm Charlotte Ramsden, Strategic Director for People at Salford City Council and this year's ADCS President.

It's a pleasure to be here in the virtual room with you all, but I am so disappointed that for the second year running, we're unable to gather face to face. The last 20 months have been like nothing we have ever experienced before, the pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives, our work and our communities and it's not over yet. I want to start by recognising again the remarkable resilience that our children, young people and families continue to show in the face of adversity. I also want to acknowledge the extraordinary work which has taken place across children's services, and the wider local government family, in response to the challenges we have faced. Good can come from adversity and we have seen a renewed commitment to partnership working, particularly with schools, which has a shared vision for children's best interests at its heart. This local strength has been recognised by national government.

While there is no doubt our experiences during Covid have strengthened commitments across partners to work together to support our communities, it has laid bare, and continues to exacerbate, many of the inequalities that have existed for many years; health, social, educational, racial, geographical and generational challenges. This is an uncomfortable truth but one from which we must draw evidence for change.

### **Spending review**

The recent multi-year spending review was a much needed departure from the more short-term national fiscal planning we're used to and will allow local authorities to undertake the strategic planning work which we know is vital to levelling-up our communities. This investment is an acknowledgement of the pressures ADCS, and its members, have been raising for a long time. The additional funding is of course welcome, however, there still remains a major financial deficit that must be filled over time, if we are to invest in children and young people today, as well as create the right conditions for them to thrive in the future.

### **Education and education recovery**

We know that education can transform lives and life chances, which is why it should be at the heart of the levelling up agenda. The additional investment in school budgets and funding for education recovery needs to sit alongside a coherent vision and strategy for a 21<sup>st</sup> century education and schools system, grounded in effective partnerships in local areas. I would hope after the pandemic experience, this plan, and indeed the forthcoming White Paper, will take a rounded view of education

beyond structures, the curriculum and classroom behaviour, important though those are, and consider the contribution of schools to wider wellbeing and children's mental health. The exponential growth in demand for, and children's ability to access mental health services, is a real worry for us all and must be a national priority area for action going forward.

This new strategy should be developed in consultation with key stakeholders, and recognise the importance of place, prioritise equality of access and the interests of learners, plus offer differential investment where needed. Of key importance are our children in care, those with SEND and learners who have opted out of the mainstream system. This strategy should recognise the central role of the local authority in education, orchestrating and corraling the system to ensure the best outcomes for children. We see little value in endless debate about structures and seek to work with the government to develop what was recently described by the Secretary of State as an eco-system of schools, which makes space for schools to stay part of the local government family, and for the role and value of local authorities to be clearly defined and enabled.

## **SEND**

The principles of the 2014 SEND reforms, co-production, integration, personalisation, and extension of eligibility to age 25 are absolutely right but the operationalisation of the reforms has, to be frank conference, failed. We are spending more money than ever before and yet no-one is satisfied. We need a national vision for education, with inclusion at the heart and rooted in the principle that wherever possible, children should be educated in settings close to home. The SEND review offers an opportunity to bring this to the fore as does the new investment in school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities, however, we need to strike a balance between building new special schools and expanding and enhancing specialist provision in mainstream schools.

## **Social Care**

"Is it good enough for my child?" is the question we ask ourselves when caring for our children in care and the current placement sufficiency challenges can mean too often, the answer is no. Often the placements available do not meet the needs of children today and we are seeing a national crisis of complex children for whom no placements exist. We need rapid, flexible and multi-agency care, that wraps around children underpinned by a new system of regulation. We also need an honest and open conversation about our tolerance to living with managed risk and finding partnership solutions. Additional funding for development of placement options makes this even more of an imperative. We must get this right.

Conference, procurement solutions simply won't work in a market with a fundamental under supply. While there may be scope for LAs to work at scale for complex placements, I am not convinced that structural change is the answer here, it has a legacy of over promising and under delivering and it feels like a gamble.



The independent review of social care and the CMA market study are opportunities to achieve great things and I am hopeful that they will deliver for the children and young people who are central to all we do. Strong communities, enabled by flexible partnership systems on a continuum of early help to intensive intervention can offer effective, strengths based support for children and families regardless of their needs. But some of the fundamental challenges lie outside of our immediate remit, yet we often have to manage the consequences. We cannot shy away from the impact of poverty and the wider social determinants that negatively impact on children's lives and the review findings need to be set in that context, even while focused on a tighter remit.

### **Workforce**

The workforce, colleagues in this virtual room and your teams, are our biggest asset however, all too often the focus from national government is limited to teaching and social work. The wider workforce is fundamental to our work yet we are facing looming capacity challenges on multiple fronts. We have raised issues around recruitment and retention, not only of social workers but also children's homes managers and residential staff, foster carers, head teachers, youth workers, educational psychologists. Urgent attention is needed, our teams are tired after 20 months of crisis response, we are running on goodwill and caffeine at this stage. We need a sustainable solution that works for government, for our workforce and most importantly, for our children.... we need a national integrated workforce strategy.

The LA has a unique, democratically mandated role rooted in place, drawing together a multiplicity of local partners to work together in children's best interests. Colleagues, children's lives don't fit in neat little boxes and yet policy continues to be developed in silos. We urge government departments to work together on the use of their SR allocations and are keen to help. Today we are publishing the outcome of our latest elective home education survey and tomorrow ADCS will publish a policy position paper on youth justice, which is a case study in the consequences of not keeping children's rights and welfare at the heart of what we do.

I've previously called for a comprehensive, strategic, long-term plan for children and I am still waiting. After the events of the last 20 months, now is the time for government to prioritise children, investing meaningfully in their futures and our country, that is how we can build back better.

Thank you