

**NCAS Conference ADCS Presidential speech
10am, 27 November 2024**

Thank you Melanie. Good morning conference, I'm Andy Smith, Strategic Director of People Service's at Derby City Council and ADCS President. I'd like to extend the welcome Mel has already offered to you, it's great to see so many of you here with us in Liverpool. The programme has been designed to have something for everyone, we've tried to capture both established and evolving policy agendas and so I'm sure there'll be some really interesting debates and discussions over the next three days.

Conference, when I became ADCS President earlier this year, I thought I'd be delivering my NCASC speech either just before, or just after a general election. Well, unbeknown to us, others were working to a slightly different timescale, and I'm stood here nearly 5 months into a new government. Although we have a new government, the core challenges we face as strategic leaders in children's services remain the same and I will say more about those in a minute. While the challenges haven't changed, I have noticed a shift in how local government is viewed, now as a partner and part of the solution, and rightly so. This is welcome and I'm looking forward to working closely with government departments as we embark on a reform programme that has an unapologetic focus on the needs and outcomes of children and young people.

Safeguarding Pressures

Shortly after conference, ADCS will publish the ninth phase of our Safeguarding Pressures Research. This is a longitudinal piece of research and the latest phase brings the evidence base up to date from April 2007 to the end of March 2024. The research shows that the trend across all domains of safeguarding activity, from initial contacts, referrals and children in need, to child protection and children entering care, remains on an upward trajectory over the duration of the research.

This latest phase of the research covering the two year period up to 31 March 2024 shows some changes in safeguarding activity which have not previously been seen, or certainly not seen to this extent.

The **lasting impact of Covid-19** on children and young people's lives and on their outcomes is increasingly visible in growing levels of mental health need among children plus their parents and carers, via heightened inequalities, deteriorating behaviour in schools resulting in rising exclusions, as well as social and developmental delays in younger children. Families are less resilient and have more entrenched, overlapping needs and challenges as the pandemic aggravated or accelerated these. My DCSs colleagues are clear, the impact on children and young people has been significantly underestimated and will continue for many years to come.

Poor quality housing, overcrowding, use of temporary accommodation and the affordability of housing is very clearly contributing to family distress and breakdown against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis. Children's services are now routinely

supplementing rents under Section 17 duties of the Children Act 1989 to sustain families and keep them together. The research also draws out challenges linked to an increasingly transient population, with families moving far from their homes and communities often due to high housing costs.

It will be no surprise to you conference that **health challenges** came through as key themes from the research, from the impact of delayed access to assessment or treatment plans for parents and carers, particularly for alcohol and substance misuse, as well as for mental health, to growing concerns about poor mental health among adolescents. The lack of focus on, and prioritisation of, children and young people in recent health reforms and the operation of integrated care systems was also frequently raised as a concern for leaders of children's services right across the country.

And indeed, these concerns have been highlighted in three recent reports, Lord Darzi's review, the IPPRs health and prosperity commission, and most recently in the latest CQC state of the nation report.

The IPPR report noted, and I quote:

*"for the first time in two centuries this generation of children are **not** guaranteed to live a longer, healthier life than those who came before them."*

The reports are a dire read, describing a system in crisis and finding that many children and young people are not currently getting the support they need, raising concerns specifically about children's mental health, and the quality and safety of maternity services – with mothers from global majority backgrounds likely to experience poor care and outcomes. This is totally unacceptable.

Conference, more than ever this phase of the research reinforced what we already know, children, young people and families don't live their lives according to service structures and remits, we are dealing with multifaceted needs which require joined up, multi-agency responses. Context is important and childhood matters, and there is much more we need to do, across and between organisations, to ensure that children's outcomes are not negatively impacted by their early life experiences.

Children's social care

It's really welcome to see that the new government has reaffirmed the commitment to multi-agency working, both in the budget and recently published DfE policy paper, *Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive*. The funding doesn't have the pace and reach we want or need, you will remember the care review costed the suite of reforms at £2.6 billion, this figure is only getting higher as time passes. However, the Secretary of State's statement last week suggested there may be some good news in relation to this soon, so lets keep our fingers crossed!

As always, I am hopeful that through the work of the pathfinders, the proof of concept argument has been won and the spending review and subsequent multi-year settlement will pave the way for the wide systemic change we envisage for the sector. By sector, I mean all of those who are here to serve the best interests of

children and families. This can't be a local authority endeavour, our schools, health services and police need to be on board, fully supported by their relevant government departments. It's not always been straightforward to achieve this alignment, let's face it, we all have competing priorities. So, the expansion of corporate parenting duties to a range of new organisations can't come soon enough, helping to ensure that the needs of children in care and care experienced young people are explicitly considered in everything they do...let's face it, it's about time too!

Conference, it will never be acceptable for large corporations and private equity backed companies to make unacceptable, and quite frankly immoral, levels of profit on the back of our vulnerable children. But it's not just about profits, often the complex and opaque ownership arrangements of such companies mean that it is almost impossible to understand where decisions are made and where the accountability lies when providers decide to exit the market because it no longer fits their business model or provision does not meet the test, 'is it good enough for my child?'

ADCS has been raising the alarm about this for years and so we welcome the government's intention to tackle this head on. And I feel I must be explicit, this isn't about every provider of residential and foster care, we have some amazing providers with wonderful teams who are absolutely committed to the children we work with, but this needs to be the expectation across the board and we're not there yet. As with everything, the devil will be in the detail, and we stand ready and willing to work with the Department for Education as it moves forward to implement these measures and send a strong message to those who have taken advantage for too long.

One thing that does worry me is the continued binary narrative around registered and unregistered settings. It's over simplifying what is a complex issue. In an ideal world, we would want all placements to be in good quality registered settings, yet the reality is that the current framework of regulation does not allow us to effectively meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable children who have highly complex needs. The data suggests this too, with over 1300 children the subject of deprivation of liberty applications to the High Court in 2023. The recent report from the Children's Commissioner on the experiences of children with complex needs who have been deprived of their liberty is a difficult read, but it helpfully recognises that the lack of suitable care settings and therapeutic support is driving the use of such orders.

Before we start to turn the dial in the wrong direction and issue civil proceedings against providers, we need to make sure that we have the right services in the right place to meet need. We also need to learn the lessons of the past. The unintended yet completely foreseeable consequences of the supported accommodation reforms mean that some vulnerable young people are now being forced into registered provision that is never going to work, accelerating the cycle of placement breakdown, and further contributing to the trauma many have experienced. I would welcome a more nuanced debate that starts with a focus on the child, rather than the registration status of a building.

Inclusive education

In my role as ADCS President, I have the privilege of going up and down the country visiting my DCSs peers in their regions and while children's social care is always at the forefront of our minds, SEND is now arguably the top issue keeping DCSs awake at night given the enormous financial pressures, the risk this poses, and ultimately, the undeniable fact that outcomes are not improving for this cohort of children and young people despite record spend.

This has been a system in crisis for some time, with little appetite at the national level to really grasp the nettle. As a result, the challenges have only become more entrenched and the system more acrimonious. The SEND Review and Green Paper provided a really clear analysis of how we've arrived at this point. Where things haven't worked and we've seen unintended consequences, we need to acknowledge that and take the learning. The draft recommendations set out in the Law Commission's Review of legislation for disabled children's social care have the potential to replicate the mistakes of the past if taken forward as currently proposed.

All parts of the sector are clear that the SEND system is broken and change is urgently needed. The extra £1 billion in the budget provides some breathing space but without fundamental reform, we will continue to have children and young people who enter their adulthood feeling ill-prepared. It's been really positive to have a shared priority with Mel, and my ADASS colleagues, allowing us to collectively consider what changes we'd like to see to ensure young people thrive as they make the transition into the next phase of their lives.

To label this as only a crisis in SEND is somewhat disingenuous, SEND is part of the wider education system which has, over time and for various different reasons, shifted its reference point of what an inclusive system looks like and the associated funding. ADCS published a policy paper this time last year outlining a vision for an inclusive education system and so it was music to my ears when shortly after the General Election, the DfE announced the realignment of SEND to the Schools Group, what a positive early indication that things may start to move in the right direction.

We need a new blueprint for SEND that is firmly rooted at the heart of the education system. The appointment of Dame Christine Lenehan as a SEND strategic adviser, along with the establishment of a group of experts to help drive forward work on inclusion in mainstream education settings, is exactly the direction of travel we need and I look forward to working with Dame Christine and Tom Rees. The curriculum and assessment review will also be a key building block in achieving inclusion. Academic attainment is pivotal, but for too long a relentless focus on exams, a narrowing curriculum and zero tolerance behaviour policies have been, for many of our children, at the expense of a positive educational experience.

Systemic reform takes time, we know that, but Rome is burning. Long term reform must be supported by short- and medium-term actions. As you'd expect, ADCS has some ideas of what would help here and you guessed it, a review of home to school transport is at the top of the list! It's estimated that by 2027/28, without any changes,

it will cost local authorities an eye watering £1.125bn to transport children to school. Just think what that money could be used for.

The Secretary of State for Education recently spoke at the Confederation of School Trust conference, where she said that the

“chase for a narrow shadow of excellence, the kind that only succeeds by pushing problems onto others – that ends now”.

This perfectly encapsulates the discourse that we've seen over recent years and I welcome the strong commitment to eradicate it. But that sense of pushing problems onto others isn't isolated, we see it across many aspects of our work. The new cross-cutting mission style of government may help to drive greater shared working but we also need to be really clear about where disjointedness is resulting in tensions in policy and unintended consequences. This results in cost shunts from other parts of the system into children's services and does nothing to improve outcomes. Child poverty has no place in 2024, it is pernicious. The impact of poverty on childhoods is widely accepted and it's not surprising that the number of families receiving local authority support due to financial hardship has increased. There are other examples, from the asylum system in the form of no recourse to public funds, to the health system where children can't access mental health support because they do not have a diagnosable condition, I could go on.

Conference, I can't stress it enough, children and childhoods matter. Before I hand over to Cllr Shah, let me circle back to where I began. The foundations that children need to thrive are now absent for a large proportion of children, which results in them arriving at our door in need of help. This isn't good for children, families or wider communities. It's time to think and work differently. We need to stop pushing problems onto others and work effectively and collaboratively, with children and families in the round, if we are ever going to achieve the ambition of making childhood matter.

Thank you, conference.