



Can I add my thanks to all of you for spending time to join us today to celebrate the launch of the new Association of Directors of Children's Services. We want this to be a brief but informative event – but above all an optimistic event as we launch an association which we think will help make a significant contribution to our collective aim of improving outcomes for children in England.

In particular I want to begin by thanking some politicians – which may be a rare event so savour it!

We are so grateful that we are being joined today by the Minister for Children Families and Young People, Beverley Hughes as well as by the Permanent Secretary for the Department for Education and Skills, David Bell. The agenda for change for children has been defined throughout recent years by a determined approach to the setting and implementing of child centred policy - a genuine collective approach with strong and clear political leadership – we do appreciate your presence here today.

I also want to pay personal thanks to the leadership of Hampshire County Council, especially Councillors Thornber, Hindson and Kirk, and my Chief Executive, Peter Robertson. Hampshire is among those authorities which recognise the benefits of working externally and nationally – their vision and generosity deserve acknowledgement.

Finally, my thanks to the support staff of both ADSS and Confed for their efforts in bringing this launch about. While we directors have pondered the future direction of the new arrangements the staff have worked assiduously to maintain continuity, ensure our ponderings make some sense and arrange events like today. Meanwhile their own jobs have been facing

uncertainty – you only need to look around you today to understand why the new associations will be very careful to hold onto their outstanding staff. Thank you.

I want to say a few words about the former arrangements before looking forward to my own hopes and expectations for ADCS.

John Freeman will pay tribute to Confed and I can only echo those comments as a relative outsider to that organisation.

For my part I want to both pay tribute and thanks to the Association of Directors of Social Services. ADSS will be with us for a few more weeks as it goes through its own constitutional wind-down and we launch ADASS. We look forward to that being an equally optimistic event on the 26th March.

Over the past forty years ADSS has established an outstanding track record and corresponding respect across the sectors. It has been a leadership organisation on behalf of some of the most complex and sensitive services serving the most vulnerable and excluded of our citizens. If you don't want to take my word for that then read Lord Utting's apposite analysis from last year.

Those services are not always popular. Certainly and sadly, they are rarely perfect. In the trade we describe them as vote losers rather than vote winners. But over the years in my view ADSS evolved into a confident and trusted voice for those services. Capable of engaging and leading a mature debate with government and the public about the nature of the services and their future direction. That's a debate which continues to pose some profound questions to us all – especially if we accept that the measure of a civilised society is the extent of its care for its most vulnerable citizens.

Once it became clear that the Children Act 2004 would see the demise of the former social services and education arrangements

- in favour of adults' and children's services – I think we all knew that the writing was on the wall for the former associations like ADSS. But we have all been careful if not reluctant about change partly because of our concern to get the new arrangements right, but also because of our fear of losing the strength of ADSS as both a brand and as an effective voice.

Certainly my own role in pulling the plug on ADSS has sometimes felt like an act of personal betrayal. I am all too well aware how much my career has depended on the experience and support I have gained from my colleagues there. It has been an intelligent, committed and effective association and we should be glad it was there.

But in the new arrangements it like Confed is no longer fit for purpose and we must look forward at a time of exciting challenges for the new services.

What has challenged us in recent months has been developing ADCS in such a way that it can build on the obvious strengths of its forebears while establishing itself in its own right. We know that at a local level the strongest children's services departments will be the ones that seek to do more than change the door signs. Similarly, ADCS needs to be more than a re-branding of one or the other of the previous associations. So we are launching today an association which will be inclusive, with a broader membership base than directors only, but one which will also be very much a leadership organisation – a venue for directors of children's services to come together - partly for mutual support - but also to provide that coherent and powerful leadership voice representing our unique statutory role.

Doubtless ADCS will develop its own tone and style over time, but contrary to certain recent reports we have no interest in establishing ourselves as headline grabbing or controversial. We will be honest and responsible in our public dealings, recognising our critical role and expertise as the bridge between

government and local children's services. Where there are inevitable disagreements, they will be rehearsed maturely and wherever possible, behind closed doors – partly to ensure we are a trusted partner inside and outside of government – but mostly because children and families deserve better of their public servants. We have to model the new agenda for partnership.

That partnership will focus on DfES but includes other government departments, notably DH, DCLG and the Home Office. And the partnership must extend to schools, colleagues in LGA, the voluntary and statutory sectors – dare I say it, even our friends in regulation.

And for obvious personal reasons I do want to emphasise how important it is for all concerned that ADCS is able to work closely with ADASS so that we avoid the dangers of new divides.

The strap line for ADCS is “leading children's services”. It's a line that reflects the statutory role of the DCS. At the end of last year DfES happily asserted that there should be no standards without ECM and no ECM without standards. Within ADCS we absolutely endorse that approach and we are determined to develop an association which will help deliver that commitment to children.

I am honoured to be in a role to help launch the association, with my joint president and trusted colleague, John Freeman. We both look forward to working with you at such an exciting time. And thank you again for joining us today.

John Coughlan