

ADCS annual conference Presidential speech
11am, 10 July 2025

Colleagues, welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2025, where the action is! It's great to be here with you in Manchester. I've been coming to the Midland hotel in July for so many years that it almost feels like a second home to me, so I'd especially like to extend a warm welcome to those 59 ADCS members joining us for the first time, it's great to have you here and I hope you enjoy conference and soon feel about this special time and place as warmly as I do. I am also delighted to welcome Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children and Families, to her first ADCS conference and look forward to hearing from her shortly.

I am grateful to Children and Young People Now, for sponsoring the ever-popular ADCS Little Blue Book, copies are available at the registration desk in the hotel foyer if you haven't already picked one up.

Colleagues, ADCS is your Association; we don't exist without our members, and it is important that you know who is representing your collective voice, so I want to take a few minutes to help you put names to faces. Members of Council of Reference, as the collective leadership body of the Association, are committed to ensuring that members who attend the conference receive a warm welcome. We did this – "stand up, identify yourselves" - last year and feedback suggested it was helpful so I'm going to ask Council of Reference members to stand up, along with the ADCS staff team, so you know who you can approach if you're at a loose end, want to chat about policy, or find out more about the work of ADCS.

Those who are standing include members of the ADCS Board of Directors, the five national policy committee chairs and vice chairs, the nine regional chairs, regional representatives and the ADCS staff team. We're a pretty big group and I don't expect you to remember us all so to help you identify people over the next couple of days, we're wearing ADCS lanyards. Please do feel free to make approaches to any one of us, particularly if it's your first time here.

You may be aware that we are making changes to the way the Association works, moving from a small group of policy committees to a range of policy networks, supported by individuals who will act as policy leads in a specified policy area. The new arrangements will help us to further distribute the leadership across the Association, allowing us to be agile and responsive in an ever more demanding environment and giving more of you a direct voice. You may have noticed as you were getting coffee, that there is some information in the foyer about the changes that are taking place, including how you can put your hat in the ring for chair or vice chair positions, or to express an interest in a policy lead role. I encourage you to go for it.

What a difference a year makes! Last time we were together in this room, a new government had just been elected and the Secretary of State sent conference

delegates a pre-recorded message that was music to our collective ears....
childhood matters!

Conference, our work is complex with many strands and multiple interdependencies. A year can feel like a long time but in policy development terms, it can pass in the blink of an eye. ADCS is an organisation that has real impact but this can't be measured in the short-term. The systemic issues we are often dealing with are entrenched and there are no easy solutions. Much of our work is focused on driving long-term, systemic change; change that demands time, persistence, and collective effort. While the Association doesn't shy away from speaking truth to power and offering constructive criticism, the change we want to see is often at the behest of the government of the day, it's the realities of the world we work in and you can't always get what you want, at least, not right away. DCSs are an experienced bunch and we are usually the first to clock when things are going a bit wrong or are having unintended and adverse consequences, I remember, years ago, when we first started raising concerns about the cost of agency social workers and profiteering in the care system. Now measures to curb those problems are on their way into legislation. So, while the change we seek might not be achieved immediately, be assured that, even though Presidents change, the continuity of our mission as an Association remains firmly focused on achieving the best outcomes for babies, children, young people and their families.

With that in mind, I wanted to take stock of the last 12 months.

A LOT has happened. I mentioned in my inaugural speech that children and children's services have rocketed up the national agenda like hypersonic missiles and I wasn't wrong. The first piece of children's legislation since 2017 continues to make its way through Parliament and there is much to be welcomed in the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill*. It seeks to address a number of issues that ADCS has been raising over recent years. As I've mentioned, influence takes time to manifest into action and on this very stage, many of my predecessors have spoken about the need to address head on the challenges in the placement market, profiteering, the social work agency workforce, the extension of corporate parenting responsibilities, the drive for greater school inclusion, and greater oversight of elective home education. The Bill presents some real opportunities which we will want to make the most of, but as with most things, it's a balancing act with questions and concerns still to be explored and resolved. ADCS members are ready to work with the government on implementation, ensuring operational literacy is woven throughout implementation plans, including managing expectations, avoiding unintended consequences and minimising risk.

This wouldn't be a presidential speech without mention of Money! There was much to welcome in the recent Spending Review, both for local government and children's services. Not only did it commit over half a billion pounds of funding to reform of children's social care through earlier intervention, but there was also a similar amount in capital investment to refurbish and expand children's homes and foster care placements. This is in addition to the funding secured in the Autumn budget which has been baked in for the remainder of the Spending Review period to deliver

the Families First Partnership Programme. Cumulatively, this brings us much closer to the sort of figures the care review pitched for in 2022 (although I'm not losing sight of the fact that all our costs have gone up since then!). Of course, there will be strings attached to the funding, there always are, but we've got an opportunity to really invest in prevention, something that hasn't been a funding or policy priority for quite some time. While a series of pilots and pathfinders are paving the way for the rest of us, many DCS colleagues are proceeding with understandable caution; this is a delicate ecosystem that needs to be carefully managed. It doesn't take much for things to start heading in the wrong direction and while the feedback from the pathfinders is encouraging, the DfE is still developing the evidence base to show that the changes will result in improved outcomes. Our candid feedback will help.

A little over 18 months ago, ADCS published a policy position paper setting out a future vision for the education system; a system based on strong collaboration and driven by a shared moral purpose across partners. It's promising to hear the Secretary of State speak in similar terms and under her leadership, the narrative around the education system has begun to be reframed. Undoubtedly, academic achievement is important, but this shouldn't come at the expense of inclusion. ADCS has previously called for a new all-encompassing vision for education that government, employers, parents, carers and learners can sign up to. One that is inclusive, not exclusionary, where the differing needs of children are recognised as a strength not labelled as a weakness, and where resources allow for additional needs to be appropriately catered for. It feels like we are edging closer to this, certainly measures in the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill* support the direction of travel, as do the commitments made in the Spending Review.

The need for SEND reform is now widely accepted across professionals, parents and carers and by government. The Transformation Fund, announced in the Spending Review, committed funding from next year to reform the SEND system to improve pupil outcomes, with a White Paper to follow in the autumn. The White Paper presents an opportunity for government to really grasp the nettle and design an education system that holistically meets the needs of all children, for the most part in mainstream settings. It's important that this isn't treated or viewed as separate to changes around education and schools. The outputs of reviews on the curriculum and inclusion, and disabled children's legislation, play in here too. If we are to achieve the root and branch reform that's needed, the role of the SEND Tribunal and home to school transport must also be in scope. Legislative opportunities don't come around often and I would urge government to really think differently and creatively as they design the future system.

Core to this will be cementing the role of partners in supporting children who need that additional help; aligning roles, responsibilities and accountabilities will be critical and yet all partners are in a state of flux, responding to their own reform programmes. We need to be alive to both the opportunities and risks of this, not least demand pressures and government policy that pulls partners in different directions. I don't doubt that this reform agenda will be challenging but we can't afford to slow it down or shy away from the fundamental change that's needed – children's outcomes are suffering and it is bankrupting local authorities. We've got

some brief respite from the pressures of the financial juggernaut that is the statutory override, this is another welcome, albeit temporary fix, rather than a long term solution. I hope it is merely a coincidence that the override has been extended to the end of the spending review period. While this medium-term solution is extremely welcome and gives us, and our Section 151 Officers, some breathing space, it would be an unwise assumption to work on the basis that the system can become financially viable within the space of two years. Financial and whole system reform must go hand in hand. With the Minister for Children and Families here with us today, I would urge government to think big and be brave. ADCS members stand with you to achieve the change that is needed.

Conference, each year the ADCS President references the impact of child poverty and the many ways we as a sector support children and families who do not have the means to meet their material and most basic needs. As a system, we spend billions of pounds addressing the symptoms of poverty, universal breakfast clubs and pupil premium being just two such examples. To be clear, this funding must not stop but if we could shift resources to actually address the causes of poverty, ultimately that families simply do not have enough money, we could stand a chance of eradicating it altogether. One of the moral dichotomies in policy is the acceptance that the system should financially support care arrangements for children who are not able to live with their parents, yet there is no clear offer of financial support to birth families to enable children to remain in the family home. I would urge government to reflect on this as the child poverty strategy continues to develop over the summer. I am hopeful that there will be some tangible actions in the strategy that actually address the root causes of poverty, rather than just the effects, and help us to finally change the narrative on this issue, which is a damning indictment on society.

As many of you will know, my route into children's services was via the early years and it's an area I continue to hold dear to my heart. There has long been a recognition of the importance of the early years and the lifelong impact of getting it right. Often childcare has been promoted as a means to support parents to work, or work more, rather than via the lens of good child development. The national target of 75% of children reaching a good stage of development and the publication of the policy paper, *Giving every child the best start in life*, earlier this week signals the government's understanding of the importance of early education, and the fact that the earliest years of a child's life represent our best opportunity to address inequalities. What the target doesn't expressly recognise, nor the national discourse, is the importance of parenting in this space. Where does parenting policy sit in government? How can we expect parents to meet the needs of their children if they themselves have needs that are going unmet. A holistic view of childhood must focus on parenting. The effects of the world in which we now live, with the demands of daily life and the pressure to use screen time as a diversion or de facto childcare, along with the lasting impacts of the pandemic experience, are not delivering what our young children need to create the foundations for a thriving life. And when things aren't going quite right and children aren't school ready, the response is all too punitive. The 'National Offer' and a vision for family support, anchored in

communities via hubs, as set out in the policy paper, offers a real opportunity to get things right for children now and in the future.

Our health partners have a key role to play in this agenda and more broadly across children's services but children are being let down by a system that continues to be dominated by the needs of adults. Some might say, and I include myself here, that the NHS has completely failed to give parity to children with adults, and to mental with physical health. DCS colleagues spent some time this morning with Tom Riordan, the Second Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care and conveyed these messages to him.

As our health partners grapple with the latest round of health reforms, I hope the mission-based government supports and enables officials in the Department for Education to forcefully advocate on behalf of both children and families, to ensure children are more central to the health service going forward. The 10 year health plan has positive soundings and I particularly welcome the focus on prevention and support prior to diagnosis in the SEND space, along with an acknowledgement that children's mental health and complex needs have to be met differently, and together. I look forward to the detail as to how the plan will deliver a health service of the future that better meets the needs of children. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has recently announced a rapid national investigation into NHS maternity and neonatal services. This is to be welcomed, particularly the focus on inequalities that women from deprived backgrounds and from Black and Asian communities in particular face in their maternity care. Shamefully, maternity care is not the only area where we see disproportionality and over-representation of global majority communities and this needs to be called out for what is it, institutionalised racism. More important than calling it out, is ensuring there is action that results in impact. As an Association this is something we will continue to press for.

At times, it feels like everything is being reformed, everywhere and all at once, particularly with the advent of local government reorganisation and local government funding reform version 2.0 after years of stasis. There are inherent risks in the sheer amount of reform coming at us from every direction. Cross government working to ensure synergy between and across reforms and sequencing of implementation has never been more important. I'm not quite sure we're there yet as there are some obvious tensions. Take the health reforms which are aggregating ICBs to deliver efficiencies at exactly the same time as local government reorganisation is taking a sledgehammer to disaggregate services with the same aim. We also have an ICB Model Blueprint that suggests statutory duties for SEND and safeguarding could be transferred to other bodies, at the same time as health are being named in legislation as one of the partners in multi-agency child protection teams.

Outside of the huge reform programmes led by the DfE, including record levels of capital investment in the school estate as well as placements for children in care not previously mentioned, we await a new youth strategy, the aforementioned child poverty reduction strategy, reforms and policy announcements from the Home Office and DHSC. We have new anti-terror legislation, a welcome commitment to halve violence against women and girls and the Young Futures programme. The latest

Casey Review on group-based child sexual exploitation; a commitment from government to implement all 12 of her recommendations plus those put forward by IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. This includes a new mandatory reporting duty for child sexual abuse. Individually these are significant reforms that will change the way we work with our partners, the public and with children and young people. What was I saying about everything, everywhere, all at once?

So, the times they are a changing and listing the reforms, not only in children's services but across the public sector, I am reminded of our call last year in our *Childhood Matters* policy paper for an overarching vision and plan for childhood. A government with a child first approach might have taken some time to pause and think about the impact of the various reforms, both individually and collectively, and what this means for children and children's services. We may well still have landed in the space we're in now, but at least we'd have considered this in the round.

As leaders of children's services, I like to think we were born to run. The day job is always busy, the demands are always high, as are the risks and also the rewards. I want to take a moment to recognise your efforts in leading your staff and your places through a tremendous period of change, and to give you permission to say it's hard – both personally and professionally. We may feel really under pressure, but all of us collectively can get through this together, you don't need me to remind you to draw on your regional links, your near neighbours and past colleagues, and to help each other – it's what we do naturally.

The programme for the conference reflects the national reform agenda. Over the last 24 hours, your DCS colleagues have been engaging in sessions on local government reorganisation, health and on changes to children's social care. Over the next 24 hours we'll be spending our time together to think about some really topical and hard-hitting areas, including violence against women and girls, serious youth violence, child poverty and the early years, placement sufficiency and education, with a golden thread of equality, diversity and inclusion carefully woven throughout the programme. There's great value in taking a break from the day job, immersing yourself in policy discussions, and meeting up with colleagues new and old. Try to avoid the siren call of your emails and stick with us in the room.

With that, I'll hand over now to Minister Daby, over to you.