



Andy Smith Inaugural Presidential Speech 16 April 2024

Thank you John.

Directors of children's services, elected politicians, senior officials, and guests, welcome to 30 Euston Square. It's great to have so many of you here today as we once again, embark on a new ADCS Presidential year. Every year we reflect on how quickly they come around, but they really do. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to mark the occasion, looking around at the distinguished people in the room shows just how much importance we place on our Association and how valued it is amongst colleagues as we collectively work together to make a difference for all children and families.

Before I start to look ahead to what promises to be a lively and interesting 12 months, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on the last 12 months. The role of ADCS Vice President is an apprenticeship of sorts and it starts with an induction into what's colloquially known as the 'presidential trio', a three-year relationship where you get to spend 12 months watching and learning from your predecessors, the President and Immediate Past President.

John has been a sterling President, leading the Association over the last 12 months with enthusiasm, candour and always a wry smile, as we've navigated the ever more complex system of children's services. I use those words deliberately as John is a systems leader and systems thinker, he is so skilled at putting all the pieces of the puzzle together while maintaining an unwavering focus on the needs of children, young people, and families. He is also an encyclopaedia of knowledge and is generous with it, I have certainly learnt a thing or two from him. John, not all Vice Presidents are lucky enough to have their predecessor sticking around and so I feel fortunate that you'll continue to be on team ADCS as you pass on the baton. Thank you for everything you've done for our Association, particularly over the past 12 months.

That leads me nicely on to our new vice president, Rachael Wardell. Unfortunately, Ofsted has scuppered Rachael's plans to be here with us today and we hope Surrey's focused visit is going well. I'm really looking forward to working with Rachael in our new roles over the next 12 months, and I hope she enjoys the induction as much as I have.

While I'm doing thank yous, I'd also like to take the opportunity to recognise a number of people, some of whom are here with us today. Thank you to Derby City Council, the leader of the council, Cllr Baggy Shanker, and Cllr John Whitby and Cllr Alison Martin, the lead members for children and adults respectively. I'm delighted that John is able to be here today. To my Chief Executive, Paul Simpson, and my senior management team across both adult and children's services, thank you for being so willing to support me in taking on this position, I wouldn't be able to do this without your backing. My amazing East Midlands colleagues also played a role in getting me here, what an inspiring bunch of people to work with, many of whom I can

call friends; I really value the network which we have. And finally, to my family, my husband, Mark, and my sister, Libby, and our two pugs who sadly can't be here today! There are also friends and colleagues here who have played such an important part in my life and career over the years, thank you for coming today.

I'd like to start formal proceedings by taking a moment to reflect on my own route into social work. I am a social worker, and proud of it, I qualified nearly 30 years ago with a focus on child and family social work, largely child protection. My route into social work felt natural and intuitive. As a former child in care, I was lucky enough to be adopted by my foster carers just before my 11th birthday, so in many ways, I knew I wanted to be a social worker from an early age. My parents were foster carers for well over 30 years and I was used to social workers visiting the house throughout my life. The relationship I had with my social worker was hugely influential in my decision to join the profession. I can say from experience that we can't underestimate the impact social workers have on the lives of those they work with. I like to think that I was always meant to be a social worker, you could say it was in my blood.

I share an insight into my background as I think it helps us to remember why we are all here, working in the sector, turning up day in, day out, trying to make a positive difference. Too often the narrative around the care system and the children it supports is deficit based. If you come to Derby and speak to my social workers, family help practitioners, and the children and families they work with, overwhelmingly, they will tell you a story about building relationships, about positive change, about optimism and looking to the future. It's a reminder that no matter the system challenges we face, and there are many, we can never lose sight of the impact we as individuals can have on the children and families we are here to serve. It really is all about people and relationships.

There are few things in life that we can be certain of but a general election during the course of my presidency is up there, along with paying taxes! My sense is that I'm about to embark on a presidency of two halves and irrespective of what happens, there is a real opportunity in terms of influencing and shaping what comes next.

Earlier this year, ADCS published a position statement, Childhood Matters, it is an urgent call to arms to put children and families at the heart of all national policy decisions and to invest in them and their futures. It is an update to a similar paper we published in 2017 under the last president from the East Midlands region, Alison Michalska, which articulated the issues and challenges facing children, young people and families. Spoiler alert, there's not a great deal of progress to report since 2017 and in many ways, life is now much harder, and the systemic issues are more entrenched:

- 4.2 million children are living in poverty, this has risen threefold;
- Black children are involved in 20% of police stop and searches, despite making up 6% of the population;
- 9 in 10 girls were regularly exposed to unwanted explicit images or videos;
- 1 in 4 older young people had a probable mental health condition in 2022, up from 1 in 10 in 2017;
- Tooth decay is the most common reason younger children are admitted to hospital;
- After inflation, funding for schools, colleges and capital investment in the school estate are at record lows;

- There was a £800m children's social care funding gap in 2022/23 and a projected £4bn local government funding gap over the next two years;
- And demand for services continues to rise across the board - in early help, children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities.

ADCS hasn't shied away from setting out the challenges but as local system leaders, we also recognise our role in helping to develop and form solutions and we have plenty of ideas, whether that's reform to the National Transfer Scheme, an alternative vision for Regional Care Cooperatives or a future vision for the education system. There aren't necessarily any short-term quick wins to these systemic issues, it requires government to grasp the nettle, make some tough decisions and crucially, invest in children's futures.

Given there are no silver bullets here, you won't be surprised to learn that my priorities for the 12 months ahead are very much an evolution of John's priorities and Steve's before him. Across the ADCS membership, there is a clear consensus on the challenges in the system, my role is now to help us maintain our collective focus to achieve the change that's needed.

Children's services needs confident and stable leadership, so you won't be surprised that my first priority is focused on the Association and our membership. Over the last 12 months, ADCS has been intentional in our focus on creating a more visibly inclusive and diverse Association. It has long been the case that there is more diversity in our second and third tier leaders than in the DCS ranks, this is changing and so are we, we've created new roles in the last 12 months that draws in the wider membership into the work of our Board and of the policy committees. The principles of diversity, equity and inclusion are fundamental to all areas of our work and we are committed to highlighting, challenging and addressing issues of disproportionality, discrimination and systemic barriers that limit opportunity where they exist and we won't stop there. Improving diversity across local authority children's services remains a key priority for ADCS; we need a diverse workforce if we are to understand and meet the needs of the communities we serve, however, this can't be achieved in isolation and we are forming alliances right across the public sector to achieve the change that we want and need to see.

I've already mentioned our paper Childhood Matters, it's a great title for a paper but it's also a profound statement, childhood does matter. That's why during my Presidency, ADCS will continue to call for the government to develop a plan for childhood focused on improving children's outcomes in a systematic way, which pays specific attention to understanding, mitigating, and removing income, health, racial, geographical, and educational inequalities, alongside a comprehensive resourcing and implementation strategy. This must be led from the centre of government giving children and childhood the priority they deserve.

To deliver this, we need a sufficient workforce. ADCS has long called for national action on the issues around cost and quality of agency social workers and we welcome the reforms which are currently being implemented but there is scope to go further and faster. Social work is not a project and it is disappointing that the Department is not planning to implement, in full, the proposals it consulted on. The original proposal to restrict project teams from holding statutory case work should be revisited, it is in the best interests of children and families and the profession. Let me be clear, there are no benefits of the project team model being deployed in

statutory case holding work other than the opportunities it provides for agencies to generate unacceptably high profits. More on profits in a moment.

The children's workforce is a rich and varied tapestry of dedicated professionals, ranging from early years practitioners to SENCOs, youth workers, residential care workers and everything in between. Every single one of them is key to achieving positive change for the future yet they are often overlooked both in terms of professional recognition and investment. There are a whole range of shortage occupations which is having a real impact on children's day to day lives, and on their families, the lack of educational psychologists is a prime example. It feels like we are now at a pivotal point where a strong focus on capacity building across the whole spectrum of the workforce is urgently needed if we are to continue to meet the needs of children and our statutory responsibilities. I'm sure everyone in this room agrees that children's services should be a career destination of choice, offering attractive opportunities and rewards as well as real career development pathways in order to retain the great people already in the system and attract new talent in their droves. I'm not necessarily advocating for a new Children's Workforce Development Council, but we do need something to give us the focus we once had and fill the void that currently exists.

This leads me onto the specific challenge about the churn in DCSs. I have been a DCS since 2015 and in 2016, I also took on the role of DASS, us twin hatters are a dying breed, I know! Being a DCS is a great privilege and I am lucky enough to work in a local authority that is supportive and where children's services are a corporate priority. We know that's not the case everywhere and as the finances get more difficult and financial risk in children's services creeps up at alarming rates, it's a tough gig for a seasoned DCS let alone someone stepping into the statutory role for the first time. Succession planning across the sector has benefited from the Upon programme, both the new DCS and Aspirant elements, however there's not much out there for old timers like me! We haven't necessarily figured in the retention discussions to date, there will be various offers of support at the local level but what is the national offer to those who hold these unique and critical roles. ADCS has a role to play here, as do government and other sector stakeholders, if we are to keep experience in the sector for as long as possible.

The government has set out big reform agendas across both children's social care and SEND and alternative provision. The principles set out in Stable Homes Built on Love are the right ones and we must guard against anything derailing the plan, continuity and pace is key. The sector is behind the reforms and as wave 2 Families First for Children areas embark on their journey as pathfinders, we need to be mindful to not leave others behind. Learning must be shared across the system so that everyone can benefit from the investment and transformation. We also need to ensure that the true costs of scaling up are fully understood and take into account the long-term costs of some of the counter intuitive decisions local authorities are being forced to make due to the current financial context. The vision, rooted in family help is the right one, but it can't be delivered on the cheap!

I'm not as convinced that that the vision and suite of reforms set out in the SEND and AP implementation strategy will deliver the step change that we need in the SEND system. As my fellow East Midlands DASS, Melanie Williams, takes the helm at ADASS, I know that SEND, with a particular focus on preparing for adulthood, will be a key focus for her too.

The government's SEND Green Paper clearly articulated the challenges and unintended consequences which have emerged over the last decade since the implementation of the 2014 reforms, yet the plan of action doesn't address them head on. We have a system that's as polarised as I've ever known it and yet we are spending record amounts to maintain something that everyone agrees isn't working. We need to go back to basics and develop a new system focused on the key building blocks of specialist provision, inspection and accountability, resources and fundamentally, the mainstream education offer.

Having an inclusive mainstream education offer is key to everything we do, not just in terms of the SEND system, it affects attendance, off rolling, children missing education, elective home education...I could go on but I think you get the picture. The consequences of a narrowing curriculum, depleting resources, an inspection regime that doesn't reward inclusivity and misplaced incentives means that some of our most vulnerable children are essentially excluded by the back door, if they even managed to get through the front door, before they have even had a chance. There are many excellent schools with committed teachers working in their local communities to support local children but we need to push for this to be the norm. The leg work has been done here, the proposals in the Schools White Paper from 2022, along with the recommendations in the Timpson Review of School Exclusions from 2019, offers a clear path which would help to pave the way for a more inclusive system, the impact these would have for many of our most vulnerable children cannot be overestimated.

Regrettably, a series of tragic circumstances have led to Ofsted's Big Listen. We welcome the opportunity to have an open and honest dialog with the regulator about the impact of inspection on individuals, their teams and children. Children's services is one of the most regulated parts of the public sector, and it becomes a crowded space when you layer on top the various other accountability mechanisms such as the Ombudsman, the Courts and Tribunal Services, the National Panel, not to mention our own localised democratic structures which provide challenge and scrutiny on behalf of the local electorate. And of course, Oflog is now around the corner.

The impact of this vast and growing system can be disproportionate and far reaching, not only for leaders and their workforce but for our children and families too. But it's not just the inspection process that we need a conversation about, it's the totality of the mechanisms at play. Ofsted are in listening mode, we also need government, who are responsible for commissioning the framework for inspecting schools, local authorities and other public services, to do the same. They are responsible for directing the interventions and consequences that follow. There is a need to rethink what the purpose of inspection is and how it relates to the wider accountability framework and ultimately, whether the system is successful in delivering positive outcomes for all children and young people, regardless of their background. At the moment, I'm not sure we can say with certainty that it is.

Before I come to an end, I want to reflect on the current placement sufficiency crisis and circle back to my earlier point about profit. Even with a growing emphasis on early intervention and family help, it will always be the case that some children need our care and protection, however the needs of this cohort will change over time as we see more teenagers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering the care system. The sector is in the midst of a placement sufficiency crisis, we don't

have enough placements, in the right locations, that meet the needs of children and young people today but this isn't new, we've been navigating this for years and the crisis continues to intensify despite the record amounts being spent by local authorities. To collectively tackle the crisis, we need government support on two fronts; a clear and properly resourced plan with short-, medium- and long-term actions which must include focusing on recruiting more local authority foster carers and taking a more transformational approach to kinship care – Regional Care Cooperatives simply won't cut it. Fundamentally, we also need to address the unacceptable level of profiteering that has been allowed to go unchallenged within some parts of the system. I'm not tarnishing all providers with the same brush nor am I referring to the hard-working residential care workers who support and care for our children, I am referring to those businesses that are funded by private equity finance for the sole purpose of generating maximum profit. The Care Review proposed a ban on excessive profiteering and a windfall tax on the largest providers. This wouldn't raise a huge sum, but it would send a clear message out into the system that children, not profits, should be the priority here. We have high hopes for the recently announced Market Interventions Advisory Group and stand ready to work with Steve and the government to ensure the money in the system is directed towards meeting the needs of children and young people, rather than lining the pockets of executives and investors.

Colleagues, the system in which we work is ever evolving and continuous improvement is something that is engrained in the sector. My sense is that there's lots to feel optimistic about as we embark on what is guaranteed to be an interesting year and, irrespective of where we land post-election, as an Association let's keep our collective nerve and continue to be unapologetic in our determination to achieve positive change and really make childhood matter. Who knows, today's children in care could be tomorrow's Directors of Children's Services!