

**Presidential Speech ADCS Annual Conference 2024  
11am, Thursday 11 July**

**Welcome**

Colleagues, welcome to the ADCS annual conference 2024, it's great to be here with you in Manchester. I'd like to extend a warm welcome to those 93 ADCS members joining us for the first time, I hope you enjoy conference. I am delighted welcome representatives from the DfE and our press colleagues. 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 if you haven't already picked one up.

ADCS provides a national voice for those leading and delivering children's services, as an Association we offer practical and professional advice to government and others in the sector to improve children's outcomes and life chances. Over the last few years, the membership, reputation and influence of the Association has grown in strength and why shouldn't it. Looking around the room we have here the very experts in all things children's services and so it is right that the Association has a leading voice that is respected and listened to. But this is only possible because of you, and I wanted to take the opportunity to thank each and every one of you for being so generous with your time, knowledge, and expertise. Without you, our work would not be possible.

As an Association we are growing, but this isn't only in our external engagement. We are becoming more inclusive year on year through explicitly championing inclusion, particularly visible inclusion, in our membership, our wider workforces and the communities we serve. ADCS has created new roles to specifically support greater diversity across the leadership of the Association and our unwavering commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion can be seen throughout the content and arrangements for the conference. We are also working with the other professional Associations, such as Solace, ADASS and ADPH, to understand where we can join forces to amplify our messages and achieve change at pace by unifying our efforts.

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 know that it can be daunting coming into a new space, particularly for the first time. I certainly remember how intimidating it was coming to Conference for the first time as a DCS in 2015, and so I want to take a few minutes to help you put names to faces, so you know who you can approach if you're at a loose end, want to chat about policy, or the work of ADCS. On that note, please can I ask members of ADCS Council of Reference and policy committee vice chairs to stand up along with the ADCS staff team.

Those who are standing include members of the ADCS Board of Directors, the six national policy committee chairs and vice chairs, the nine regional chairs, regional representatives and the staff team.

You'll see that we have different lanyards, this is something new for this year in the hope that you can easily identify people who are here to support you and help you

get the most out of your conference experience, please don't be shy about making any approaches and remember the staff team can always facilitate introductions as well. Also new this year are the feedback walls....please do use them to feed your thoughts into the Association's work and planning for future events. The strength of the Association lies in its membership so please do use the next couple of days to create new networks and reinvigorate old ones, the time we have together as peers is precious and invaluable.

During my Presidential inaugural speech back in April, I said that it was going to be a presidency of two halves...how I was wrong. I'm not sure any of us expected a general election in July but we knew that whenever it was and whatever the outcome, it would present an opportunity which we must grab onto with both hands. So, with a quarter of the presidency under my belt, we now have a new government and I want to make the remaining three quarters really count for children.

Earlier this year, ADCS published a policy paper called 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 describes the impact of 14 years of austerity and what happens when children's needs are on the periphery of national policy making. The direct impact this has had on childhoods, children's outcomes and on the public services they, and their families, rely on can't be overlooked. Life for many is now much harder, and the systemic issues are more entrenched. I shared these statistics from Childhood Matters back in April and I'm doing so again as quite frankly, they are shameful:

- 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;
- Demand for services continues to rise across the board - in early help, children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities;
- And the LGA has recently revised the expected local government funding gap over the next two years from £4 billion to £6.2 billion, it's change, but not in the direction we want or need!

Over recent weeks, ADCS has been preparing for a new government, particularly in relation to those first 100 days which we know are so crucial, by identifying the top issues for children, young people and families, as well as government. These broadly fall into three themes; childhood, cross government working, and specific policy challenges. If you think we've missed anything, please do use the feedback boards to let me know!

## **Childhood matters**

Childhood matters and children do not experience it in a vacuum, they experience it in their families, in their communities. The impact of 14 years of austerity on public services has meant that the very social fabric which many of us rely upon has been eradicated. While there continues to be a funding gulf in children's services, the overall perilous state of local government finance must be addressed if we are serious about addressing the growing inequalities that have been left to go unchecked. Long term, sustainable funding for local government is the only solution.

There are huge, irrefutable issues that are impacting on large numbers of children and their families that need to be addressed to provide the stability and security that is such an important element of childhood. The impact of child poverty is now widely reported. From the two-child benefit cap, homelessness and unsuitable temporary accommodation, general financial insecurity for families, particularly working parents, to the overall impact of austerity which has limited our ability to mitigate must now be addressed. The new government has committed to an ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty, I would say this doesn't go far enough, we need to eradicate child poverty if we are to start to create a society that is based on the principles of social justice and recognises the importance of childhood for all children.

For many of us, life post pandemic has returned to normal and the experience of lockdowns, social distancing, waves, bubbles and tiers feels like another lifetime ago. However, we are now working with a generation of children that spent their formative years living under restrictions, having limited social interactions, educational experiences and quite frankly the opportunity to play and have fun. The pandemic did not impact us equally either; health, social, educational, racial, geographical and generational inequalities became more visible as the pandemic progressed and are becoming more entrenched as time goes by.

While at the time, the restrictions we lived under were implemented for the right reasons, we are now dealing with the consequences of this and will continue to do so for years to come. Consideration of the ongoing impact of the pandemic has been absent in national policy development and as the Covid Inquiry launches its eighth module focusing on children and young people, ADCS will continue to call for the right resources to ensure we do not have a generation of children whose lives and life chances are forever impacted by global events.

### **Cross government working**

Of course, this could be addressed by the development of a cross-government plan for childhood focused on improving children's outcomes in a systematic way accompanied by a long term, sustainable funding settlement. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, this is something ADCS has called for over a number of years.

While the Department for Education has a lead role, several other government departments front different aspects of children's policy. The system is fragmented which leads to silos and limits our ability to positively work with children and families in a holistic way and have full impact. The disjointedness also results in tensions in policy development, with the Illegal Migration Act being a perfect example, and unintended consequences, such as cost shunting from other parts of the system into children's services. The system is creaking under pressure, and this only

emphasises the significance of the need for the Treasury to view the system as a whole.

There are things that the new government could do to signal a change, transfer leadership on youth justice and the Youth Justice Board to the Department for Education, along with youth services so these areas can align with wider children's services policy. It makes no sense for the Home Office to lead on the development of a new network of Young Futures hubs, if we are serious about the principles of prevention and early intervention, the government must transfer this to the Department for Education so it can be developed as part of the early help offer rather than an intervention further down the line.

### **Policy asks**

I'm an optimist and my glass is always half full. And, while at times, it has been frustrating as big issues in our world and children's lives have been crowded out by Brexit or the latest reshuffle, the sector has coalesced around a number of priorities. While there may be different views around the detail and sequencing, there is agreement that the status quo is quite simply untenable.

### **Children's social care reform**

We have a blueprint for reform across children's social care, including the role of our statutory safeguarding partners, which as a sector we have started to test out. The principles are the right ones on which the system should be developed – prevention, early intervention and keeping children within their family network wherever safe and possible to do so. We are well versed in the pressures in children's social care and we simply can't afford to derail the plans or indeed take our foot off the gas; both in terms of children's outcomes and the finances that we are diligently trying to balance day in, day out. While much of the reform programme sits firmly within our remit, we cannot do it without our safeguarding partners playing a fundamental role within the plans going forward.

I recognise the challenges of the economic climate in which we are working but the reality is that the reforms cannot be delivered without appropriate funding and we can't continue to rob Peter to pay Paul; it just doesn't make sense. The big figure in the care review was £2.6 billion and that doesn't include the ever-growing funding gap. The longer we leave it, the more it will cost; we need to reset the system now.

While we continue to make the case to ensure the true costs of scaling up are fully understood and are based on the reality of services being cut and scaled back as we speak, individuals and organisations are amassing huge wealth on the back of the work we do to support children and families, some of whom are experiencing the most challenging times in their lives. Profiteering on the back of public services is simply not acceptable. Prior to the general election, the DfE's Market Advisory Group led by my predecessor, Steve Crocker, started to consider what national action is needed to address the spiralling costs of placements for children in care and the profit that is being made as a result. I think I can speak for all ADCS members when I say we are ready and willing to support this work and any action the new government is willing to take to ensure that the resources we have available are directed towards improving the lives of children and not shareholders or hedge fund investors.

There continue to be cohorts of children whose needs are not well met by the system in its current form, particularly those at risk or experiencing extrafamilial harm and those with complex needs, these two categories aren't mutually exclusive as we know children and young people's needs are multifaceted. We don't have the right models to respond to some of the most vulnerable young people who present a risk to themselves or to others, our default position can often be the use of deprivation of liberty orders. Task and finish groups, and roundtable discussion haven't delivered any change. The new government should review the system of children's mental health as a priority and introduce a Better Care Fund at place to act as a vehicle to bring partners together to deliver against shared priorities for this cohort. We need to see action here, but we can't do it alone.

This leads me on to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the National Transfer Scheme, it simply doesn't work and hasn't for a long time. Year after year, there is a crisis response from government when arrivals start to increase in line with the better weather; it almost as if we didn't know this was going to happen.....it's been happening every year since 2016. Notwithstanding the placement sufficiency challenges that we are grappling with, there are actions that could be taken immediately to help alleviate some of the pressure. The UASC care leaver funding needs to be reviewed urgently. Given the significant and growing numbers of former UASC care leavers, it's not acceptable that the commitment to review this has not been met. The calculation of the 0.1% threshold doesn't take into consideration the number of former UASC care leavers, this needs to be addressed. And finally, given the significant majority of former UASC care leavers are granted leave to remain, why must they have no recourse to public funds while they await decisions. Allowing temporary access to benefits and the right to work seems like an obvious step in the right direction. I also hope that given the events of last week, we will now have an opportunity to pause and take stock on the Illegal Migration Act. ADCS has been clear from the get-go that the Act is in conflict with the legal framework in which children's services operates. Last year's High Court judgement was also clear, the Children Act 1989 takes precedence.

### **Inclusive education**

It's time to reconsider and reimagine what an education system fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century looks like, it must be one that supports children through their formative years so they are prepared for adulthood, can play an active part in society and contribute to the development of the economy. The alarming erosion of hard-won inclusion across mainstream education and the growth of demand in additional support is not a coincidence, it's the result of a system that places academic achievement above all else, with regulatory and funding arrangements that reinforce this. As a nation, we need a new all encompassing vision for education that government, employers, parents, carers and learners can sign up to. One that is inclusive, not exclusive, where the differing needs of children are recognised as a strength in a school, not a burden to it, and where resources allow for additionality to be appropriately catered for. ADCS believes this vision must be rooted in place through the development of place-based school partnerships, based on strong collaboration and driven by a shared moral purpose across partners. I've said it once and I'll say it again, some of the solutions are in the Timpson Review and the shelved Schools White Paper, they just need dusting off.

The implementation of the 2014 SEND reforms has resulted in what is essentially a separate system funded via the high needs block. The challenges in the SEND system are well versed and at the top of the worry list for most, if not all, DCSs so I won't rehearse them yet again. While the high needs block continues to be a ticking financial time bomb, at the forefront of my mind are the experiences and outcomes of children and young people. There are children in specialist provision that up until only a few years ago would have been well supported in mainstream education settings, many of these children are being educated far away from their homes, families and communities, ultimately unprepared for adulthood and experiencing further challenges when they reach this critical point of transition. We can't address these challenges in isolation, a new vision for an education system with inclusivity at its heart is the only solution.

In recent years, the driver for early years policy has been to enable parents to work or work more hours, rather than a means of supporting essential child development. Early years must form a key building block in a new education vision embracing the principles of early identification and intervention, not to divert children onto a specialist pathway but to quickly deliver any additionality that may be needed to support children to thrive. I truly believe that if we get this right in the early years, where children and parents feel supported, this will pave the way for the future.

While I'm on the subject of SEND, I will once again reiterate ADCS' call for a pause in the Area SEND inspections. It is an assurance of local systems and partnerships that are in crisis as captured and described in detail in the previous government's SEND Review, Green Paper and subsequent Improvement Plan. There is absolute consensus that the system is broken and that the systemic challenges cannot be resolved by individual areas without national action, yet areas are being issued with improvement notices and the threat of intervention, it just doesn't make any sense.

### **Workforce**

As with all things, our workforce is key, I truly believe that the people who work for us and with us are our greatest asset and resource, yet there are workforce challenges right across the system. The work we do across the spectrum of children's services takes dedication, patience and quite often just sheer determination, it's not an easy gig. How we attract and retain a suitably skilled and sufficient workforce is key to improving the system but I don't think we've got it right and we need to think hard and fast about how we attract people to come and work with us. Children's services needs to be a career destination of choice, offering well regarded, well respected career pathways which are rewarding. Spoiler alert, incorporating more regulation and accountability measures into what is already a high stakes system, isn't the answer.

The work which the DfE have done, very much in partnership with ADCS, on agency social work workers is a welcome step in the right direction. While the statutory guidance doesn't come into force until September, I know that this is already having an impact in local areas and we are seeing a welcome shift. I am still disappointed at the Department's last minute U-turn to restrict project teams from undertaking statutory social work and I would urge the new government to revisit this as soon as

possible. Working with families in a relational way to effect change for the better is not and never will be a project.

### **20 years of the DCS role**

It would be remiss of me to conclude without first reflecting on what is a significant anniversary, this year marks 20 years since the passing of the Children Act 2004 and with it the creation of the statutory role of Director of Children's Services....time flies! The role of the DCS is like no other, it's fundamentally about harnessing the wider system across place to come together to deliver for children and families. The introduction of the role meant that for the first time, there was a senior voice around the top table unapologetically banging said table for children and their needs. What a simple yet fundamental concept given what we know about the importance of childhood.

A lot has changed in 20 years, the needs of children and the landscape in which we work is drastically different and yet the role of the DCS has stayed the same. Without a doubt, I believe that the statutory role of the DCS has supported improved outcomes for children across the board. The role is still relevant, has currency, and has never been more important given the issues impacting on children. Directors of Children's Services are accountable and are held to account, yet many of the levers we now need to improve outcomes for children are not in our gift, the SEND space is a prime example of this. Multiple and often complex national reforms have resulted in accountability and responsibility no longer aligning. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care called for a review of the DCS role, such a review would provide an opportunity to ensure the role has the levers and powers to advocate in 2024 and in the future.

Being a DCS is an absolute privilege, there is no other role I would want to do, but it also challenging in so many ways, and this can be seen in the level of churn we're currently experiencing. How we recruit and critically retain DCSs is key and something that we need to give more thought to. Reviewing the role and giving it the appropriate levers would be a first step in the right direction.

### **In conclusion**

Colleagues, as I draw my speech to a close, I'm going to leave you with a quote from the Doctor himself, Dr Who:

"I am and always will be the optimist. The hoper of far-flung hopes. The dreamer of improbable dreams."

There are challenges in the system, there always will be, and with them, there will always be opportunities. As I look around the room I see the sector experts, we know what the issues are and crucially, we know where the solutions lie. As we embark on new conversations with those in Whitehall, I will continue to push to make childhood matter, if now isn't the time to do this, when is?

Given the general election was only last week, unfortunately the new Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, is unable to join us in Manchester, however, I'm really pleased to say she has prepared a pre-recorded message for us.....