

Rachael Wardell inaugural Presidential address

(9 April 2025)

Thank you, Andy.

Colleagues, it's great to see so many of you here in London today to formally mark the passing of the ADCS Presidential baton from one DCS to another. As is tradition with these things, I'm going to start with a few thank yous.

First my very own "stable home, built on love" my family, who are all here today. Steve, Theo, Freya, Hadrian and Isis, thank you for your constant love and support and endless patience and good humour! Then I must thank the Leader of Surrey County Council, Tim Oliver, and the Cabinet and Deputy Cabinet Members, Cllr Curran and Cllr Attewell, thank you for being here with me today and also for supporting me in stepping into this important national role. I'd also like to thank my Chief Executive, Terence Herbert, for his support. And we're joined by members of my senior leadership team and my support team, without whom none of this would be possible. Thank you for all the work you do for Surrey children and families, and for the support I know you'll offer me over the coming year.

I couldn't stand here today without reflecting on those who have gone before me, particularly my two immediate predecessors. John Pearce has just come to the end of his year as Immediate Past President. John, ADCS has really benefited from your wisdom and experience, and it will be strange not seeing you at our weekly catch ups. But you know what they say, once a President, always a President, and if a niche query about SEND funding arises, we know where you are! Andy, what a year you've had! You've been an exceptional President, expertly navigating the early stages of a new government, helping to shape and influence reform programmes that will change the way we work with children and families for the better, and responding to the first piece of children's legislation since 2017! To say it's been busy is an understatement, particularly in the last six months, but your glass has always been at least half full as you always like to say, and you've embraced every opportunity with your contagious enthusiasm and smile! Andy, we thank you for everything you've done. And I'm already excited about who will come next: our new Vice President, Ann Graham, Ann it's great to have you on the presidential team and I'm really looking forward to working with you over the next 12 months and beyond.

I'd also like to take a moment to remember one other former ADCS President, Dave Hill. Dave was DCS-but-one in Merton before me, and was DCS in Surrey at the time he died suddenly in 2020. I've been thinking about Dave more than usual in recent days and weeks as I've followed in his footsteps more than twice. I took over from Dave as the Chair of the ADCS Workforce Development Policy Committee in 2015 when he was elected as ADCS Vice President; I became a Trustee at Become - the charity for children in care and care leavers - when he stood down on his move to Surrey. And now I step into the Presidential role he held almost a decade ago. It's strange how these things happen but in each of these roles, Dave helped to lay the foundations for many, not just me, to thrive.

As President, Dave had an unwavering focus on the need for the care system to secure loving relationships that last. As strange as it may sound now, back in 2016, we didn't often talk about relationships when we talked about policy, and we almost never talked publicly about love in the same breath. But over time, and partly because of Dave, love is now part of our everyday language and indeed is embedded in policy via *Stable homes built on love*. This is a great example of how shared personal values can change policy and practice over time. It also illustrates the impact of ADCS.

Much of ADCS' work is about influencing long term systemic change, this doesn't happen overnight but we can see impact, if we give it that time. The priorities of the Association reflect challenging societal and system issues that can't and won't be solved over the course of one Presidency, yet the consistent focus the Association brings to the issues that are important to our members, and, above all, to children and young people, pays dividends over the long term.

This brings me on to our priorities for the year ahead. Although it feels like we've made some important progress over the last 12 months, there is always more to do, so our focus and energy over the next 12 months won't deviate much from where it's been.

What is different as we embark on this coming year is that children and children's services have rocketed up the national agenda and the amount of change that is coming our way is exciting and unnerving in equal parts. We're all used to managing uncertainty, but the scale of change that's on the horizon feels unprecedented. We have a children's social care reform programme under way, we are expecting a significant programme of reform around SEND, the curriculum and assessment review, a shake-up of inspections, a new youth work strategy, Young Futures, local government reorganisation and the devolution agenda, funding reform, health reforms, and a review of the police – I could go on. Much of this is very welcome and long overdue. We will certainly be making the case to really centre the needs of children at the heart of future arrangements right across the public sector. But such large-scale change, across virtually every aspect of our world, doesn't come without risks and we must guard against all this leading to destabilisation.

We often talk about the need to create the "conditions for success" in children's services and I'm clear about the conditions I've needed to lead a children's service through an improvement journey and beyond:

- Clarity of purpose and ability to prioritise because there are many competing demands, and you can't do everything all at once
- Stability and continuity in the workforce so that you have capacity to tackle priorities and reliably embed new practice
- Values-led leadership so success is sustainable, and your best people are committed to the cause

- Community understanding, support and belonging around a collective endeavour
- There is no escaping from actually doing the hard work and keeping an eye on continuous improvement. All the fancy strategies, communications, measures and reporting cycles are no substitute for actually fixing what needs fixing
- And finally, this all takes time, and a level of 'protection' or shelter is required to give the time and space needed to deliver the improvement.

We, and our partners, would do well to keep these factors in mind as we move into a period that has the potential to be turbulent for all of us, and yet requires us to keep an unwavering focus on those we serve.

This is why ADCS will continue to call for a more coherent focus on children from across government which focuses on improving outcomes in a systemic way; I'd say **a child first approach** to national policy making has a good ring to it! Children and families continue to face significant and growing challenges. The foundations for a secure childhood – a safe, warm and – yes - stable home, financial security and good health, both physical and mental – are no longer present for too many children growing up in this country. That one in three children now live in poverty should shame us all.

There are some big, thorny problems that we're grappling with, some are new and emerging, however, some are sadly as old as humanity. The recent and urgent public debate about violence against women and girls perpetrated by men, and about 'what it means to be a man' in 2025 illustrates this. While this is a perennial issue, something new and different is happening online and out of sight that is fostering suspicion, hatred and violence. New legislation and guidance will not address the root causes of violence, abuse and exploitation. This is about culture, values, accepted norms and practice, which is difficult terrain. Ultimately, this is a safeguarding issue for girls, and for boys, and we as adults need to get to grips with it, fast.

These issues must be a call to action for us all, particularly national government who still hold many of the levers here. Our children aren't a homogeneous group, in fact the under 18 population is significantly more diverse than the adult population. National policy making must recognise the strength of diversity across our communities. For too long, our national debate hasn't acknowledged issues of disproportionality, discrimination and systemic barriers that many of our children, young people and families face or the impact of the intersection of these issues on life experiences and on outcomes. The Care Review did highlight this and more recently, so did the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's report on race, racism and safeguarding, but I've yet to see this reality both recognised and embedded in national policy responses. The Panel recognised that some progress has been made in understanding how race, ethnicity and culture can inform practice responses to children and families, there is more to be done to ensure our services and workforce consistently consider, understand and take account of children's identity and heritage.

As leaders of children's services, we are nothing without our workforce, it's where the magic happens, whether that be working directly with families to influence positive change, working with colleagues and stakeholders to develop new services or reforming the ones we currently deliver. We have come a long way over the last 18 months or so with a focus on agency social work and this is starting to bear fruit if the recent social work statistics are anything to go by. However, the ambitious plans for reform I touched on earlier rely on local authorities, and partners, having a sufficient, stable workforce and yet there continue to be significant recruitment and retention issues in some areas and we have shortage occupations across a range of professional disciplines. ADCS would welcome getting ahead of the curve by exploring how the regulation making power contained in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill could be used in other shortage occupation areas to close the loophole and avoid the over-reliance on expensive temporary arrangements.

Phase 9 of the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research includes reflections from front line workers on their experience of the pandemic and how on a personal level, the "clap for carers" initiative left them feeling unseen and undervalued. While many of us stood on our doorsteps five years ago, pan and wooden spoon in hand, intending to celebrate the amazing work of all our key workers, the public narrative was firmly focused on the NHS and the other emergency services. It seemed rarely to touch on the essential work of our social workers, family help workers, residential care workers, nursery staff or even teachers. We need to bear these very personal reflections in mind as we explore how we can further develop a valued local government workforce and make this a sought-after career destination. Nor did the clapping recognise those working families in low-paid occupations that were just expected to 'carry on' in order to keep the country running, from bus drivers to supermarket workers, many of whom continue to experience the impact of the pandemic five years on.

Childhood matters and the unique experiences each child has as they grow from being babies to starting school lay the foundations for happy and healthy adulthoods. Yet for so long, the national discourse around early childhood has focused on childcare as a means to support more working parents to work more hours, rather than fostering early childhood development. There is a growing body of evidence, including our own Safeguarding Pressures research, that suggests post pandemic, an increasing number of children are simply not developmentally ready to learn in a traditional school environment, and too many parents are struggling with their own unmet needs.

For the first time, poor parental mental health has overtaken domestic abuse as the most common presenting factor in children's social care assessments. How can we expect parents to support their children to thrive if they themselves aren't having their needs met? The government's opportunity mission target of 75% of 5-year-olds reaching a "good level of development" gives us an opportunity to reconsider what a system of holistic support for families of children in the early years looks like. But the target is also a sobering reminder that even if it is met, 1 in 4 children aged 5 will not have a good level of development and we need to be clear about what that means

for children. Recognising the diversity of readiness that exists in our under 5s must be the starting point for an inclusive mainstream system. The principle that children should be able to enjoy their childhood alongside their peers is one that we need to hold dear for all children, not just some.

Where pre-school age children aren't meeting their milestones, ADCS members are clear that education, health and care plans are not the answer. A statutory process that results in a plan, and potentially a label for life, is not an appropriate response to the range of variation in development in really young children, this is damaging to later life chances and building up long term problems. I hope this will be a consideration in whatever comes next in terms of SEND reform.

I don't need to rehearse with you all of the reasons why we urgently need reform of our support and services for children with additional needs and disabilities but I think it's important that we continue to remind ourselves that under the current system spend has never been higher, outcomes are getting worse for children and young people, and all but a few councils fear bankruptcy overnight if the statutory override is withdrawn!

ADCS has been clear that any reform programme can't just be about SEND, it must deliver an inclusive education system, with education in mainstream provision as the presumption (as originally envisaged in the 2014 Act), and a graduated response to those children who need additional support. If we present this as a reform of the SEND system only, how on earth will we build parental confidence in the mainstream education system; this needs to be twin tracked recognising that we can't achieve one without the other. It has been heartening to hear the Secretary of State's recent speeches that have been rooted in the presumption of inclusion, and the education measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill are a welcome indication of the direction of travel. SEND has risen to the top of the worry list of most DCSSs, and probably a significant number of Chief Executives and Section 151 Officers too, and time is not on our side with the end of the statutory override fast approaching. ADCS has put forward a number of short- to medium-term actions which would help to alleviate the immediate pressure many of us are experiencing while laying the foundations for more fundamental reform further down the line. We are ready to work with government on the reform that is now urgently needed.

Our health partners have a key role to play across children's services and I mentioned earlier last month's announcement about the future of NHS England. This is leaving many of our partners in health organisations reeling. Sometimes it can feel like the NHS is in a constant state of reform going from PCTs, to CCGs, to ICBs – you get the picture. Unfortunately, in the recent past, NHS reforms have not served children well. Against a backdrop of perpetual crisis, it can feel like children's needs are being deprioritised in the face of an aging population, growing demand for acute services, waiting lists running into the millions and evermore challenging financial contexts.

There is now a real opportunity to consider how the health service can best meet the needs of children and young people in the 21st century. By any measure, action is

needed, whether it is the growing prevalence of mental health needs amongst children and young people, rates of suicide and self-harm, falling take up of childhood vaccines, hospitalisation due to severe dental decay, or levels of obesity. Our children are not healthy. Indeed, last year the IPPR's Health and Prosperity Commission called for a 'new beginning' for childhood health following a breakdown in the health inheritance, noting for the first time in two centuries this generation are not guaranteed to live a much longer, healthier life than those who came before them. If that isn't a call to arms, I don't know what is.

And while I'm on the subject of meeting the health needs of children, treatment targets for children's mental health services have in the past left the majority, two thirds, without support. The next iteration of the 10-year plan must be more ambitious for our children, we can't afford it not to be. Let's be clear, both government and regulators would not allow this level of unmet need to go unchecked in any other part of the system. Accountabilities and responsibilities must be realigned as the transfer to DHSC takes place to ensure that children get a better, more equitable deal. ADCS will continue to push for a root and branch review of children's mental health services. And if we get it right for children in the present, we store precious wellbeing for them as adults in the future.

By tradition, most ADCS presidential speeches conclude with an inspirational quote. In recent times we've enjoyed words of wisdom from the great Jurgen Klopp (thank you John) and Dr Who (thank you Andy), but I am turning to a literary quotation, and to my early years route into children's services.

As I stand on the brink of this year of great adventure, I draw on a phrase I think many of you will know. Certainly, I will never forget it after reading it aloud to Theo [that one] every bedtime for nearly a year!

From the marvellous team of writer Michael Rosen and illustrator Helen Oxenbury, it would stiffen the resolve of Presidents and bear hunters everywhere:

"We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!"

These words brace me whenever I face something challenging in the day job and come to mind again as I embark on my 12 month stint as President. There's no going under, over or around these really complex and knotty issues for our children and families. We are going to have to go through them. I'm looking forward to us doing so together and achieving meaningful and positive change!