

National Children and Adult Services Conference

ADCS Presidential speech

10am, 26 November 2025

Thank you, Amanda. Good morning conference, I'm Rachael Wardell, Executive Director – Children, Families and Lifelong Learning at Surrey County Council and ADCS President. I'd like to echo the welcome Cllr Hopwood, Cllr Taylor and Jess have already offered to you. I hope you enjoy the next three days here in Bournemouth, the programme has been designed to have something for everyone, I've no doubt it will stimulate some interesting debates and discussions over the next three days.

I will never tire of saying "Childhood Matters", because a happy healthy childhood is fundamental to everything we do. It's the most effective form of prevention available. Getting it right for children across every aspect of their childhood - building their resilience and sense of self - helps to lay the foundations for wellbeing in later life.

Raising a family in the 21st century isn't easy because the context in which we all now live isn't simple or straightforward. Parents and children themselves are navigating a world that is developing at an astonishing pace and often it can feel like we're running to keep up. The world of technology has transformed our lives, often for the better. It connects us like never before, but this also comes with new and different risks; children are exposed to damaging content and parents seek advice and community from online influencers who are accepted at face value as experts, but where the advice may be far from sound.

Five years ago today, we were in the closing stages of the second national Covid lockdown. Unfortunately, the pandemic was far from over and we continue to see the impact of that period on our children and young people to this day. The Covid Inquiry is highlighting what we already know; children were not at the centre of the government's pandemic preparedness or response. While we as adults were allowed an hour a day to get out of the house and exercise, the needs of our children were overlooked by those in power and they were denied the most basic tenets of childhood, such as playing outside or visiting grandparents. You simply can't do these things a few years later, childhood doesn't work like that. We are now dealing with the consequences of a cohort of children who did not experience a "normal" childhood in their formative years, and this is playing out in record levels of school absences and exclusions, along with levels of mental health need amongst children, young people and adults.

The inability to access swift and appropriate mental health support is a national crisis for children and it simply isn't good enough! This blights childhoods and it drives demand in other parts of the system. The latest phase of the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research found that poor parental mental health was the top presenting factor in children's social care assessments, overtaking domestic abuse for the first time. My colleagues also reported an increase in safeguarding demand over the last two years linked to children's poor mental health; the inability to access timely assessment and treatments means children are reaching crisis point and their families no longer feel they can keep their child safe, or families themselves do not feel safe with their children.

As the NHS heads into another period of transformation, we urgently need parity of esteem; there has been some progress in relation to physical and mental health but there is more to do in terms of children's and adults' health. The recent announcement that there will be an independent investigation into the rising numbers of young people who are not in employment, education or training, with a particular focus on the impact of mental health conditions and disability, shows how alarm bells are ringing for us all.

Poverty underpins so many of the challenges that lead families to our front door. It is pernicious, it directly impacts children and their outcomes, and drives huge inequalities in our society, yet progress to address this has been painfully slow. The contributing factors are complex and interconnected: insecure work, insecure housing, a reduction in benefits, a cost of living crisis, a legacy of reduced investment in public services, hostile immigration policies...I could go on. There are 4.5 million children growing up in poverty in the UK, two thirds of whom have at least one parent in paid work. Poverty is now so widespread, I worry that as a society we've become immune to the injustice of it and powerless to tackle it.

The living context for some of our most financially challenged families could be changed literally overnight and so I wait with anticipation to hear what the Budget will say on this matter. Having said that, we also need to think bigger, think longer term and think family, so alongside any Budget announcement, the long-awaited child poverty strategy must offer an ambitious and multifaceted way forward to truly change childhoods for the better.

To say there is a lot happening at the moment is the understatement of the year, and it seems to get busier as the year goes on. There is a certain energy that comes with a new(ish) administration that wants to see change and needs to deliver with pace. But I'm worried that the continued lack of cross-departmental, and in some cases intradepartmental, join up has resulted in a blind spot for government. And, they don't see or understand the awesome, all-encompassing nature of the cumulative ask, and therefore don't acknowledge the capacity required to deliver such a broad change agenda at the local level in children's services, in our wider organisations and at partnership level.

There is local government disaggregation happening at the same time as the health service is aggregating upwards, funding reforms, new legislation, a best start in life programme, a changing school curriculum, a youth strategy, a review of Social Work England, plus a suite of policy announcements and reforms from the Home Office including IICSA and Casey review recommendations, a new violence against women and girls strategy, and changes to PREVENT plus a new policing white paper on the horizon too. I could go on adding to my list, but I know you get my drift!

There is an argument to be made that all of the policy areas I've listed are long overdue attention, but I'd also argue there is benefit in considering carefully the impact of the various reforms, both individually and collectively, and thinking about what this means for children and children's services. We are yet to see a national strategy for children that brings synergy, coherence and an element of prioritisation to the myriad reforms that we're expected to implement, a strategy that delivers for both national and local government. Without this, we are at risk of spreading our resources too thinly and not focusing on the areas where we will have greatest impact.

Keeping children safe, helping families thrive set the direction of travel for children's social care reform. Underpinned by the legislation currently making its way through parliament, much of this reform programme is welcomed by ADCS members, particularly the action on the placement market. Last week's announcement of additional funding for the Families First Programme is also welcome and will support local authorities to continue their journey of implementation. But we are duty bound to flag to government unintended consequences and the notes of caution that our members are raising around:

- The underdeveloped evidence base and therefore the need for local flexibility to recognise the variation in local context, stages of development, states of partnership working and resourcing
- Variable multi-agency ownership, which remains challenging. Cross government support and funding is needed plus new levers to bring partners to the table in respect of family help
- The reforms don't yet significantly touch on harm outside the home, given the increasing age profile of children entering the care system, we're missing an opportunity to rethink this area of safeguarding and responses to ever-evolving online risks and harms.

ADCS welcomes the constructive dialogue we've had with government to date on these issues. I hope we can continue this once the Bill is enacted and the DfE begins to consider guidance, regulation and implementation.

While there is always work to do to continue to ensure our social care systems are effective and meet the needs of children, the existing system is already much improved. However, the need for significant, systemic reform to the system of special educational needs and disabilities must be a priority for us all. That system is quite frankly, broken!

The need for change is urgent and long overdue, the evidence is clear and continues to grow, the system is costing record amounts and crucially, is not improving outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children. If that isn't a burning platform, I'm not sure what is. New research from the County Councils Network confirmed what we know, the longer it is left, the worse the situation will become. As plans for reform continue to be developed behind closed doors, ADCS members are experiencing a surge in requests for assessments from parents and carers who are scared about what these reforms may mean for them and their children; this was a totally foreseeable consequence and a sign of where we find ourselves. Every delay is a further knock to parental confidence.

Reform on this scale is complex and must be well thought through. It's now over a year since government appointed a SEND strategic adviser and established an expert advisory group for inclusion. The curriculum and assessment review recently reported and offers a route forward for a broader, more inclusive, national curriculum. This is welcome but only one part of the jigsaw. Meeting the needs of children with additional needs must be a golden thread running seamlessly through our education system. If it continues to be seen as different or a bolt on, any reform will simply create a different form of exclusion. Ditto coherence with and genuine links to the changes being brought into children's social care, to the NHS, and down the line, to adult social care reforms as well.

A well-resourced, inclusive mainstream education, that is able to identify and offer a graduated response to needs early on, must be the bedrock of any future system. Education,

health and care plans cannot remain the default mechanism for securing support. Unless a clear, targeted support tier is developed, and crucially financed, pressure will continue to build at statutory level, driving delay, escalation, litigation, eye-watering costs – and – shamefully - poorer outcomes.

We need a national blueprint offering clarity so that parents, carers, schools, and professionals understand what can be expected without a statutory plan and what a statutory intervention adds. Health and care partners need to be fully embedded as equals, with duties that are workable and enforceable through direct accountability, rather than as an adjunct to education provision. Crucially, there also needs to be reasonable limits as to what the state can and should provide.

Reforming the routes of redress will be necessary. In no other part of the public sector can a Tribunal overrule a professional, multi-agency assessment and direct a local authority to meet a parental preference, without any consideration of resource or alternative appropriate provisions. The same is true for home to school transport where parents can name a school in an EHCP without considering the associated cost and travel time, in the knowledge that these will be picked up by the public purse. Until there is a change in legislation, supported by alignment of responsibilities, accountabilities and funding across the system, nothing of significance will change.

ADCS stands ready to work with government. Collectively we need to be brave and bold to get this right, and time is running out.

Conference, I purposefully want to end my NCASC address by reflecting on what brings us together, in this room, on a chilly, but sparkly November day. It's our shared commitment to the transformative power of public service, our dedication to understanding and meeting the needs of our local communities, and our endeavour to deliver better outcomes for the people that we serve.

One of my ADCS colleagues recently wrote powerfully about the concept of stewardship in leading collective commitments to tackle inequalities and discrimination. This really resonated with me and so I wanted to share it with you today. He wrote that as leaders we are not passive observers in the system. We hold privileged roles, underpinned by statute, and are duty bound to lead courageous and challenging conversations, not only amongst ourselves, but with our partners and residents too.

As leaders in the public sector, we hold a unique and urgent responsibility, not only to the workforces we lead, but to the children, families and communities we serve. Children's services are built on trust, safety and belonging, these are the very foundations of our work. Inclusive leadership isn't a 'soft skill', it's a safeguard and we have the potential to achieve great things when our teams feel valued, our services remain equitable, and children grow up in environments that affirm their identity and dignity and tell them that they belong and are valued. That's what drives us to do the work we do, day in, day out and while it is not easy work, we reap the benefits when we see our collective effort literally change lives for the better.

The news agenda both at home and internationally may seem to paint a relentlessly bleak picture sometimes, but I urge you to hold on to what we know, this turmoil and unease does

not define us, it does not speak to all of us. In times of uncertainty, conflict and division, there is power in hope, optimism and unity.

As one great leader once said: “we must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope.”

Colleagues, I urge you to hold onto that hope. Leadership in children’s services is about more than education and safeguarding — it’s about shaping the kind of society our children will inherit. By finding ways to lead inclusively – and holding on to them when they are challenged - we send a powerful message: that every child matters, every voice counts, and every person belongs.

Thank you.