

ADCS annual conference Presidential speech
Delivered at 11am, Thursday 9 July 2026

Good morning, welcome to the ADCS annual conference, it's great to see so many of you here with us today. I'm duly informed that there are 69 ADCS members attending conference for the first time, so I'd like to extend a special welcome to you. I hope you enjoy the next couple of days here in Manchester.

Before I go any further, I want to quickly introduce ADCS Council of Reference, as the collective leadership body of the Association. 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, if you need any information, or if you want to discuss any of the work of ADCS. You'll be pleased to know this isn't a memory test and we are all wearing different lanyards so you can easily identify us over the course of the conference; you'll also have your copy of the *Little Blue Book* to help if you want to make contact with any of us post conference. As always, thank you to Children and Young People Now, for their sponsorship of the *Little Blue Book*, copies are available at the registration desk in the hotel foyer if you haven't already picked one up.

Conference, the work you do every day is, at its heart, about improving the life chances of children and young people. It's what drives us every day to strive for the best and ask the hard questions... 'is this good enough for my child?' if the answer is no, we can often find ourselves looking for solutions in a system that's constrained. While this can be frustrating, and that's putting it politely, we keep moving forward, and we keep trying.

We work with many vulnerable children and families who need to believe we, as system leaders, service leaders, and our teams, are working to create communities in which they can feel safe and thrive. These are divisive times and we need to be steadfast in our commitment to championing the cause of our diverse communities; leading with care, generosity and kindness at a time when these qualities can feel in short supply. So, I want to take the opportunity to recognise, and say thank you, for the work you are doing. I see the impact we have achieved individually, and collectively, and I also know this is not easy work, and these are challenging and different times. And as many of us are saying in different places and spaces, the pace and scale of change is like nothing we've ever experienced before.

Today, ADCS is publishing an update to our position statement, *What is Care For?* The first version was written in 2012, and has been used to articulate members' collective aspirations for the care system and the children in our care. Throughout, the role and value of care as a protective factor has been recognised, it **can be** totally transformative. In the 2021 version, we recognised and acknowledged a further and important purpose of the care system, and that was to provide relationships that are meaningful, where there is an emotional commitment from adults, so children feel loved; it is the difference between being cared for and being cared about, which all sounds a bit *Stable homes built on love*, does it not? This time, in this newly updated version, we've really honed in on the needs of

adolescents. And we've not shied away from the hard questions of ourselves either, like, is care always the right or best response to a young person who is being criminally exploited or making attempts on their own life? In the absence of an alternative, sometimes, we find, it's the only available option.

Over many years, systemic challenges, relating to funding, placement sufficiency, cost, workforce, inspection and regulation, have all curbed our ability to act and shape, but never our ambition. What is Care For? 2026, recognises the government's reform programme, the move to regionalised models of commissioning **and** the potential for impact. It also asks some important questions about the role of the health service, the use of innovation to support families, the impact of socio-economic factors on the current model of fostering; and the ongoing impact of profiteering.

Conference, I put my hat in the ring for the presidency because I wanted to shine a light on the needs of adolescents, and the importance of taking 'a safeguarding in place approach' to identifying and addressing risk. I have been using this platform as a means to raise the issues with the Secretary of State, Deputy Prime Minister, Ministers, senior civil servants and the National Panel, and all have been positive. And you'll see we have a session on this on the conference agenda tomorrow as well.

The *Independent review of children's social care* recognised failings in both policy and practice, especially in dealings with extra-familial harms and adolescent mental health, recommending clearer expectations on corporate parents and the need for this to be a priority area for learning. There are new corporate parenting duties in the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026*, but action from government is also needed to join up priorities across social care, health, police and justice to deliver tangible impact. Yesterday, DCSs came together to collectively consider how we can best support the needs of adolescence given the scale of work which is taking place. Over the summer, we'll be working on a paper to bring this all together and make some policy and practical recommendations for change.

At the risk of repeating myself, we know that children who are missing from one area are often missing, together with their friends, from another area. They are being criminally exploited for the purposes of financial gain, trafficked to 'transport and sell' drugs across the country, what we professionals now call "county lines". Children exploited in this way are often also exposed to violence, which has become normalised in society. I think this is shocking and often wonder **how** did we get here? As a sector, we know that a critical protection against violence and exploitation is reducing school exclusions so that children remain in education, with the support of all agencies working together; schools, social care, early help, and health services. This can be done – we've seen positive results in my own local authority, but we know that the data is variable up and down the country. This is challenging, collaborative work. I hope that the work we will do together, with government, our statutory partners and others, is such that, we incrementally find ways of keeping more and more children in the school system so that they have supportive opportunities to be safe and to maximise their life chances.

Last year on this stage, Rachael Wardell spoke about violence against women and girls, and we must keep this issue high on the agenda. As we know from Phase One of the Southport Inquiry, we need to consider how best to respond to individuals who are fascinated with violence when our systems and frameworks are set up to focus on the risk of harm to the child themselves rather than the risk the child poses to others. With a ban on social media for under 16s announced just last month, questions about how our work can see the child's whole reality, their life on and offline, feels more pressing than ever.

The relationship between safeguarding and young people not engaging in education, employment or training is well recognised. Alan Milburn recently published his interim report on his *Review of young people and work*. The findings should be a warning to us all about the consequences of a shrinking public sector combined with policy decisions that do not prioritise or centre on the needs of children and childhood. It is not surprising to me that we are seeing the impact of this now in real time, a child turning 16 this year has grown up only under austerity. To quote the report:

"Becoming NEET does not start at 16, children who are not school ready at ages 4 or 5 are nearly three times more likely to be NEET at ages 16 and 17."

The report reflects on the contribution of education, welfare services, the economy and health, recognising that this is a problem grounded in social disadvantage, with systems that are badly designed, poorly connected and even indifferent. The review is clear that this generation of young people are facing a multiplicity of challenges and demands unlike any that has gone before it, from rapidly deteriorating mental health, the legacy of both the pandemic and austerity, to the technology revolution and the housing and cost of living crises. More than two thirds of young people who are NEET have a health condition, which is described as the "standout change," but not the whole explanation. Other factors at play include geography, ethnicity, access to transport and social media.

There are structural and systemic inequalities in the provision of public services that affect both children and families, but not all children and families. Socio-economic status can drive the level and type of intervention children and families receive; whether that be higher intervention of children's social care where there are indicators of social disadvantage, ongoing racial disproportionality in the youth justice system, particularly for our Black and mixed-heritage boys, or how racism and discrimination is experienced both by families, and staff, in maternity services. It is shocking that children from the most deprived areas in England have more than double the mortality rate than those in areas with the lowest deprivation. Similarly, infants from Black and Asian ethnic groups consistently have higher mortality rates than those of other ethnicities. Cohorts of children also continue to be less well served by the education system which includes, but isn't limited to, white working-class children, and those with SEND. It can feel challenging to raise these issues in a political and diverse world, but we mustn't shy away, it's incumbent on us all to strive to do more.

You'll know the phrase 'it takes a village'. The early years is where we can collectively set the foundation for the best start in life, working with parents and in wider family contexts, to build the resilience and stability children need to thrive in childhood. There is great work being done in family hubs up and down the country and with a commitment to full roll out, more areas are set to benefit from this way of working. But this is about more than buildings and individual children, it's about community resilience. In my own area, our family hubs have worked hard to build trust with some of our most marginalised communities, which has enabled us to engage on a new level, for example, with the Charedi Orthodox Jewish Community and it is working well, and there is much more that we can do.

I also know that there are colleagues in this room, and beyond, leading brilliant work in family hubs, building trust and working with marginalised communities. I want to give a 'shout out', for the sector led improvement work that we do through our Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances. RIAs are the engine rooms that help us collaborate in and across regions, sharing good practice across everything we do. This is where some of our best work, such as the development of anti-racist practice, really begins and has impact, from the ground up. RIAs are also the space where we can come together with government to work collaboratively on joint priorities, we only need to point to the excellent work done on our approach to manage the agency social worker market. This movement started in RIAs and positively, the DfE took up the baton and helped us to put it on a national and statutory footing. Funding for RIAs remains critical and I am grateful for the support of the London RIA in the development of our work on Stop and Search, an innovation!

The 'Milburn Review' was clear, some of the biggest predictors of becoming NEET are having an education, health and care plan or SEND need and missing school. The latest statistics show two million children and young people have SEND needs and the numbers of pupils who are persistently absent, suspended, excluded or home educated continue to rise with no indication of when these trends will reverse. Conference, this should be a worry to us all. A big, bold response is needed.

In my inaugural speech, I welcomed the government's *Schools White Paper* and *SEND Reform Plan*. Creating an inclusive education system, where every child and young person can achieve and thrive, is our collective number one priority and will transform the position we find ourselves in now. However, we must learn the lessons of the past in order to avoid repeating them. It is worth noting that in the ADCS response to the SEND reform consultation, we captured the wisdom of a group of DCSs who were in post in 2014 and still are today. They warned of:

- A lack of genuine shared accountability across education, health and care partners;
- Local authorities carrying responsibility for delivery without the necessary levers to influence provision or spending;
- EHCPs becoming the primary gateway to support and funding, driving escalating demand;

- Funding arrangements that incentivise crisis intervention and escalation rather than early support;
- An approach to funding that has generated unsustainable financial pressures and growing deficits (notional budgets anyone?); and,
- An overemphasis on compliance and process as a measure of successful reform implementation, rather than on the quality of provision and outcomes for children and young people...

Sounds familiar, right?

The Department has recently launched a consultation on changes to *Working Together 2026*, with significant proposals around changes to Section 17, and Ofsted too is seeking comments on associated changes to the ILACS inspection framework. The principles underpinning this learning are just as relevant to the children's social care system as they are to SEND.

The DCS is surely the most unique, and rewarding, leadership role in the public sector. The work we do is, by its very nature, high stakes balanced with high reward. I recognise the ambition for change and the passion that is driving this at both the local and national level, but there is only so much change a system can absorb at once and a finite capacity to deliver. While money is important, this isn't just about money, it's about setting strong foundations upon which to build, workforce, culture, those conditions of success that are so important, set against a backdrop of a decade and a half of being stripped to the bone. I could list all the legislation, guidance, reform programmes, organisational changes, funding announcements and bidding processes, inspection changes, reviews and inquiries that have been announced in the last two years, all arriving on top of the day job, but we'd be here for a while, instead, we've put it into a nice visual.....

July 2025: New NHS long term plan inc ICB restructures and abolition of NHSE	Sept 2025: Georgia Gould MP becomes Minister for School Standards at DfE	Oct 2025: NAO publishes report on home to school transport	Dec 2025: Independent review of NEETS announced by DWP	Jan 2026: Home Office publishes new Policing White Paper	Feb 2026: Newknife crime guidance published by Home Office	March 2026: Working Together 2026 guidance published by DfE	April 2026: NAO report on school places	April 2026: HMI Constabulary thematic report on online child sexual abuse	May 2026: DfE announced £12.4m fostering innovation fund
July 2025: Independent Southport Inquiry launches	Sept 2025: Baroness Jacqui Smith becomes Skills Minister at DfE	Oct 2025: Post-16 education and skills white paper published	Dec 2025: Review of mental health, autism and ADHD led by Prof Peter Fonagy starts	Jan 2026: JTAI thematic report on domestic abuse publishes	Feb 2026: Initial plans for youth justice reform published by MoJ	March 2026: Independent review of police forces launches	April 2026: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act gets Royal Assent	April 2026: DfE announces guidance on mobile phone use in schools to become statutory	June 2026: Prime Minister announced a ban on social media for under 16s
July 2025: Best Start in Life strategy for the early years publishes	Sept 2025: Covid 19 Inquiry Module 8 (experiences of children) hearings start	Nov 2025: DfE sets new LA targets on Good Level of Development up to 2028	Dec 2025: New VAWG strategy published by the Home Office	Feb 2026: MHCLG publishes new Local Outcomes Framework	Feb 2026: Early social work career development plans published by DfE	March 2026: Update to National framework for CSC published	April 2026: Crime and Policing Act gets Royal Assent	May 2026: National Panel publishes a neglected thematic report	June 2026: DfE announced £8.4m for family finding services for care leavers
July 2025: ICIBI report on age assessments for unaccompanied minors	Sept 2025: Child sexual abuse in the family environment JTAI launched	Nov 2025: Gov announces Police and Crime Commissioners to be abolished by 2028	Dec 2025: Independent inquiry into grooming gangs announced	Feb 2026: DfE publishes Renewing Fostering plans	Feb 2026: DfE publishes SEND reforms and accompanying consultation	March 2026: Update to ILACS framework published (removal of headline judgements)	April 2026: Victims and Prisoners Act gets Royal Assent	May 2026: NEET review interim report publishes	June 2026: Review of residential children's home work force launches
August 2025: Medway Secure School closes due to safety concerns	Sept 2025: DfE's national workload action group reports	Nov 2025: Sara Shariff learning review publishes	Dec 2025: New child poverty reduction strategy publishes	Feb 2026: YJB public bodies review reports	Feb 2026: DfE publishes new Schools White Paper	March 2026: MoJ confirms full rollout of the Private Law Pathfinder	April 2026: Tobacco and Vapes Act gets Royal Assent (ban on sales to anyone born after 1 Jan 2009)	May 2026: MoJ publishes a new white paper on youth justice	June 2026: DfE publishes enduring relationships for care leavers paper
Sept 2025: NAO publishes report on children's residential care publishes	Sept 2025: KCSIE guidance updated	Nov 2025: Government announces plans to cover 90% of LA SEND budget deficits	Dec 2025: Youth Matters strategy published by DCMS	Feb 2026: Safeguarding review of youth custody by C&F Chief SW starts	March 2026: National learning review on protecting babies publishes	March 2026: Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Act 2026 receives Royal Assent	April 2026: Phase one report of the Southport Inquiry publishes	May 2026: Children's Commissioner launches The Big Future	June 2026: DfE published Experts at Hand SEND guidance
Sept 2025: Josh MacAlister MP becomes C-F Minister at DfE	Oct 2025: Surrey Local Gov Reorg outcome announced	Nov 2025: Fair Funding policy statement and £5bn uplift confirmed	Dec 2025: 8 Young Futures Hubs pilot sites confirmed	Early 2026: UKHSA warns of a measles outbreak mainly in under 10s	March 2026: Applications open to establish up to 6 new RCCs	March 2026: Government launches Growing up online consultation on use of social media	April 2026: National rollout of breakfast clubs in primaries	May 2026: SoS for Education asks CMA to look at childcare market	June 2026: Working Together 2027 consultation launched
Sept 2025: Olivia Bailey MP becomes Early Years Minister at DfE	Oct 2025: NHS maternity review launches involving 14 hospital trusts	Nov 2025: New Ofsted framework for schools and new scorecard judgements	Dec 2025: DfE consults on plans for a new Child Protection Agency (CPA)	Feb 2026: 7 local areas to pilot Kinship Zones named	March 2026: LGR outcomes in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and Hampshire confirmed	April 2026: Sir Stephen Cobb named new President of the Family Division	April 2026: Care Leaver Deaths Review announced	May 2026: DfE publishes CSC reset implementation plan	June 2026: Kier Starmer resigns as Prime Minister

Key policy developments and events in 2025 / 2026

Between July 2025 and the end of June 2026, there has been:

- 1 key piece of legislation plus 4 other new acts with measures relating to children and families and/or children's services;
- 6 new Bills in the latest King's speech relating to children, families or children's services, including the *Education For All Bill*, which will underpin the SEND reforms;
- 4 new strategies;
- 4 white papers;
- 21 consultations or calls for evidence – that's just the ones ADCS has responded to;
- 10 inquiries or reviews have started or reported in this period;
- 9 policy papers, guidance or plans have published;
- 1 new funding formula for local government;
- 1 new funding formula for children's services; and,
- 8 new councils created as a result of LGR, with more to follow...

This is the new and ever-growing Jenga tower we are holding together; these are the plates we are spinning. The layering of significant reform we are currently experiencing is like nothing before, it is overwhelming and we have been raising the alarm with government. We are in the process of change, but we are changing cultures as well as systems. And culture change takes time! The real risk is that we don't achieve the vision because we are stretched too thinly across multiple and

often competing priorities, and don't have the time needed to properly embed the changes we are making. For some of us, and I'm speaking about my colleagues experiencing LGR, the ask is even more daunting, and the risks are even more stark.

The work of the DCS, and our leadership teams, involves making difficult decisions and managing competing demands. We do this in a considered and collaborative way, taking people with us on the journey that's needed. We don't work in command-and-control environments, this isn't the type of culture we choose to cultivate; we won't improve experiences and outcomes if we lean into process and compliance.

These are human services; we are children's services. ADCS is ready to work with government across the plethora of reforms, but we must be a partner in that process.

DCSs understand our local places, can make the right connectivity and deliver because we know our children, we know our families and we know our communities. The sheer scale of knowledge and expertise in this room, and in our teams back at the ranch, cannot be overlooked and I urge government to use it to best effect. To stand alongside us, and children, to secure the very best settlement for them and for their futures.