



## **ADCS President's opening address**

### **National Children and Adult Services Conference 2020 (online)**

**Wednesday 4 November**

Thank you, James and welcome to conference colleagues. I'm delighted that so many delegates and contributors are joining us over the next three days. Whilst NCASC online has fewer sessions than the live event, the key topics for children's services are covered: diversity and inclusion; safeguarding across the age range; funding; unaccompanied asylum seeking children; mental health; return to education; inspection; the Care Review; and the response of local government to the pandemic.

Conference, these are truncated opening speeches, so I shall cut to the chase. I have five things to say.

**One, Covid has laid bare and exacerbated existing inequalities across our society.** The pandemic disproportionately impacts upon the elderly, the poor and the young. The elderly because they are more likely to experience severe symptoms and sadly pass away. The poor because they live in poor-quality housing and have insecure work. And, the young because of the impact on their education and their future life chances. More than 4 million children were living in poverty before the pandemic, the majority of whom lived in a working household. Conservative estimates indicate the impact of Covid will be to plunge a further 200,000 children into poverty. Children from BAME groups are more likely to be in poverty – 45% of all BAME children compared to 26% of all white British children live in poverty. Disadvantaged pupils in England are 18 months of learning behind their better-off peers by the time they finish their GCSEs. This year, for the first time since 2007, the attainment gap at primary school increased. Children from households in the bottom fifth of income distribution are over four times more likely to experience severe mental health problems than those in the highest fifth. These factors and others, combined with the cycles of adult disadvantage – poor mental health, alcohol and drug misuse, prevalence of domestic abuse – potentially severely limit children's life chances.

**Two, the case for investing in children has never been stronger** if we are to prevent the long tail of disadvantage from blighting the lives of children and young people for a generation. Investment must be prioritised to focus on:

- **prevention & early intervention.** A comprehensive all-age multi-agency prevention strategy is needed. The contribution educational settings, that's early years, schools & colleges, can make to this agenda when funded adequately to do so cannot be under-estimated.
- Investing in **re-setting the SEND system** to ensure the needs of children are met in mainstream settings where possible and as close to home as possible
- **Care** – we have a sufficiency crisis and market forces will simply not work to address the challenges of a lack of available and suitable homes for children

in care which are in the right place at the right time. Nor will the market, which is an illusory market by the way, address the spiralling costs of independent placements.

- Investing in a **first-class education** for all pupils. One that is inclusive, has a broad curriculum and employs a range of assessment and testing tools which allow all pupils to demonstrate their potential.

**Three, the imperative of central and local government acting in concert to address the pressures in the care system is clear.** The single biggest cost pressure within children's services budgets is the cost of homes for children in care. Mergers and buy-outs by venture capitalists are actually contracting the number of providers in the 'market', this despite the increase in demand. The Care Review offers the opportunity to think creatively about a whole range of permanence options, including using care in a flexible way to support families staying together rather than separating them – a shared care model. The responsibility for finding a home to meet the needs of a child in care lies with the LA as corporate parent, however, responsibility for ensuring LAs can meet their statutory duties towards children, rests with the DfE. **It is time to act.**

**Four, this is not a total counsel of despair, Conference.** Throughout the pandemic, and during the ensuing Byzantine local restrictions and enduring social distancing measures, which some areas of the country have experienced for a significant time, many, many families have shown remarkable resilience. We have also seen a reaffirmation of the strong partnerships that exist between local authorities and schools. Recovering, re-storing and re-setting after the pandemic provides an opportunity for government to pursue its levelling up agenda, through the lens of social justice and for the statutory and voluntary sectors to play their parts. How?

- By increasing spend on early years particularly in deprived areas
- By actively tackling child poverty. This year, 2020, marks the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Prime Minister Blair's pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020. A cross-government forum is essential to achieve this aim and, in my view, the DfE should take the lead. Indeed, the ambition of ADCS has long been to see the DfE acting as convenor of the central government partnership, in the way a DCS leads and convenes local partnerships in the best interests of children, young people and their families
- By focussing forensically on closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. The DfE's own research from 2017 estimates the potential economic value to the UK of reducing the attainment gap in England to the same levels as in London could lead to an overall financial benefit of circa £12billion
- The journey ahead for us and the children we work with will not be smooth. None of us is wholly sure what lies beyond the Covid horizon. But I know my



colleagues in children's services across England will remain committed, as I am, to making this a country that works for all children.

**The fifth and final thing I want to say is best said by children and young people themselves. Roll VT and thanks.**

**[Hertfordshire County Council Children in Care animated video plays for three minutes]**