

John Pearce Inaugural Presidential Speech, 18 April 2023

Introduction

Thank you Steve.

Directors of children's services, elected politicians, senior officials and guests, welcome to the Kings Place. The last year has really flown by since everyone came together at the Museum of London to celebrate the start of Steve's presidency. Unfortunately, I had to miss that event due to Covid, it's fair to say I feel healthier but also rather more apprehensive than last year! It is great to be here in London surrounded by people who have common cause; working day in, day out with the aim of making children's lives better.

Before I get on to the business of the day, I must start by saying some thank yous. Firstly, to Durham County Council. I would like to thank the Leader of the Council, Cllr Amanda Hopwood and Portfolio Holder, Cllr Ted Henderson, along with the Chief Executive, John Hewitt and our Corporate team, my senior management team and of course my PA, Rachel Briscoe, who keeps me organised and in the right place. Thank you all for allowing me the time and space to take on this national role on behalf of the sector.

I'd also like to recognise my DCS colleagues in the north east region, they are an incredibly supportive group and having both that personal and professional network is so important when you are in this job, it's part of what makes it doable.

I'd like to also take the opportunity to pay a public tribute to my predecessor, Steve Crocker. At the start of the month, Steve not only passed the Presidential baton on to me, he also retired as the DCS in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight after over 33 years of working in children's services. We have said our private thank yous to Steve this morning but let me take this opportunity to say again in front of our esteemed guests, what a brilliant President you have been.

You have led the Association over the last 12 months with unrivalled energy and enthusiasm, representing the membership at critical junctures in the children's service policy landscape, many of which I will come on to in just a moment. You surely now hold the record for the number of Secretaries of State met and briefed in a single presidency and whilst you offered to pass on your introductory notes, I'm hoping for a more stable year!

You have steadied the ship when we found ourselves in challenging times and laid the foundations for the Association to continue to thrive in to the future. We thank you for everything you have done for ADCS, and not just over the last 12 months but over a significant proportion of the last 33 years! Steve, it has been an absolute pleasure to be your 'veep' and I've learned so much from you over the last year, we will miss you but I am sure this is not goodbye, just see you later.

And finally, to my vice president Andy Smith, I'm really looking forward to working closely with you so we can continue to build on the great progress of the last 12 months, ensuring the voice of the Association is continuing to help shape the future of children's services.

On to our policy priorities for 2023/24

The reality of life for an increasing number of children and families in England today is desperately challenging. As we emerge from the covid era and continue to deal with its impact on multiple fronts, the cost of living crisis and record inflation has further compounded the entrenched inequalities we all know exist and impact the lives of our children and families.

As children and families struggle to make ends meet, public services don't necessarily have the resources to step in and help, often all we can offer is a sticking plaster. It simply cannot be right that in a civilised society in 2023, we have record numbers of people turning to foodbanks for support because they cannot afford to feed themselves. Just last month, the Department for Work and Pensions released their annual Households Below Average Income report. It shows that in the year ending March 2022, 29% of children living in the UK were living in relative poverty. That's 4.2 million children, and represents an increase of 350,000 on the previous year. What's stark is that the vast majority of these children were living in families where at least one adult was in work. You only need to look at the level of child poverty across the North East to understand why I am so passionate about this subject.

Poverty is impacting our communities to such an extent that it underpins so many of the challenges that lead families to our door. Poverty effects every aspect of family life and we desperately need a national response that firstly acknowledges this reality, but more importantly, addresses it, in a coherent, long-term way. We cannot have the impact on children's lives that we would all want without a joined up national policy agenda that tackles this underlying issue.

The foundations of the government's social care implementation plan, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love', relies on the capacity of families to support themselves when many cannot. It also overlooks the fact that right across the public sector, both locally and nationally, we are spending tens of millions of pounds every year mitigating the impact of poverty on children's lives. 2013 research by Loughborough University for the Child Poverty Action Group estimated the annual cost of tackling child poverty to be £29m. Given everything that's happened since 2013 I think it's fair to say that number would be much higher now. We cannot afford either the societal or financial impact of child poverty so at what point do we collectively take the decision to stop fighting the fire and address the root causes. In very simple terms, if we do not intervene now to address the dangerous levels of child poverty in our society, we seek to undermine the aspirations set out in the government's flagship reform agenda.

As I start my Presidential year, I am once again reiterating the call that many of the ADCS Presidents that have come before me have made, we need a cross-government ambitious strategic plan for children which clearly sets out how we as a system, can make this a country that works for all children. This plan must be predicated on improving outcomes for all, with a sharp focus on addressing and reducing the entrenched inequalities that we know exist.

Asserting a strengths-based approach to SEND

And while I am on the topic of improving outcomes and addressing inequalities, we need to start a serious conversation about how collectively, we reframe our ambition for children with SEND to be strengths-based, supporting children to achieve their potential and focusing on a life-long approach. We must move away from what has, in the last decade, become a diagnosis led system towards one that is underpinned by a social model of disability, one which looks to remove unnecessary barriers which prevent children and young people from being able to participate fully in day-to-day life, and helps to develop independence.

While the SEND and AP improvement plan will hopefully nudge the system to be more inclusive, it's impact will be limited as it fails to address some of the real challenges that obstruct inclusive practice, blur accountabilities and allow the system to be gamed. The whole theory of change is based on increased mainstream inclusion but without the accompanying Schools Bill, I fear that we will end up taking the low hanging fruit and the nice to dos. That is all good, but given where we are, it's simply not enough.

We need to deliver real and sustainable change moving towards an inclusive education system enabled to meet the needs of all. We have not had the required focus on the barriers to mainstream inclusion, that include funding, workforce, inspection, curriculum and the accountability framework. Unless this is addressed, the welcome ambition of the improvement plan will not be achieved.

To pick up on one particular strand, we are now at the start of a revised SEND inspection framework which I fear is inspecting through the lens of the system we want, rather than the system we have, warts and all. There must be genuine tripartite accountability if this framework is to lead to change, with schools and health partners held equally accountable as local authorities for the outcomes of children with SEND. This inspection framework must be aligned closely with Ofsted's school inspection and CQC's health inspection if it is to be meaningful and support improvement.

The Care Review

ADCS welcomed the government's implementation strategy for children's social care reform. There has been a positive level of engagement in the development of what comes next and it is clear that government has listened to the sector when shaping the proposals and they are the better for it. As we turn our attention to implementation, ADCS is uniquely placed as the 'doers' in the system who will translate policy into practice. Therefore, we will again have a crucial role to play in continuing to constructively engage and challenge government and partners to get the best deal for children. Part of this will be ensuring there is read across to the other reform programmes, particularly SEND and AP. We currently have a dichotomy in approach, on the one hand, children in care should be placed as close to home as possible and in a family environment, but on the other our model of care and support for children with complex SEND has shifted radically towards independent residential special school provision far removed from a child's home and community. There must be more coherence and clarity in our ambition and vision, similar to what has been articulated for the care system.

Across the ADCS membership there is a wealth of knowledge and expertise that we can draw on to help shape what comes next in children's social care. A key part of my role will be to continue to bang the drum on the fundamental challenges around resources. The £2.6bn recommended in the Care Review was to 'transform' the system, it wasn't addressing the significant shortfalls in funding that already exist across the country. There is a real risk that the benefit of funding available in the short term of £200m to fund pathfinders and for national programmes of work will be undermined by core funding pressures. We need to build a bridge to the next Spending Review when even if the full funding identified in the review is made available, significant risks remain as you can't reform a system that is fundamentally financially compromised.

Whilst welcoming the strategy, I need to say that we don't agree with everything in it and have made our thoughts well known about the proposals for regional care cooperatives, as have others in the sector. Local authorities know their communities, and connectivity to place is an important principle that runs throughout the implementation plan. We are best placed to work with partners to understand and meet the multi-faceted needs of children, young people, families and communities.

Additionality can be achieved in the system by operating strategically at different geographical levels to develop sufficiency in the system but only where it makes sense to do so, these arrangements can't be forced or nationally mandated, overriding our clear duties set out in statute. As a DCS, I am responsible for my children in care and care experienced young people and I would not willingly forego my responsibilities to another body established at regional level. That would leave me with all of the accountability but even fewer levers and less control.

While I'm on the subject of statutory responsibilities, let me be clear, they apply to all children, irrespective of their race, ethnicity or nationality and that is why ADCS has voiced significant concerns about the government's Illegal Migration Bill and the damaging effect it will have on children. The proposals set out in the Bill run counter to everything we hold dear in the Children Act 1989 and largely contradicts the government's own recently articulated vision for children in our care. The Bill could drive increased safeguarding risks for children and families and will irreversibly distort the care system. The care system is not, nor should it be, a holding mechanism for the immigration system. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives primacy to the best interests of children; sadly this Bill in its current form is far removed from these aims.

Considering the system factors

Where the implementation strategy doesn't go far enough is on the system factors that hinder our work on a daily basis. Going back to regional care cooperatives, the proposals don't centre on children's needs nor will they address the systemic issues that are hindering sufficiency and affordability of placements. The CMA report was clear that there is more the government could do to help create the national system conditions needed for success. The residential care system is broken and to suggest that LAs working together at greater geographic scale offers a legitimate solution to this is ultimately flawed. A simple structural solution to a complex problem may seem appealing but will not work.

Over the last 12 months, ADCS has been sounding alarm bells about the challenges of children and young people's mental health services, particularly for those with the most complex and overlapping needs. The way the system responds to children with complex trauma is no longer working for children. We need to put children at the heart of the health system and I fully echo Steve's previous calls for a national review of the children's mental health and wellbeing system to ensure that the needs of children are being appropriately met in a timely manner. Need and demand is rising at every level, our approach to eating disorders and autism aren't yet right either.

Too often, children are treated differently to adults, denied the same entitlements or access, with the inequity of guidance on continuing care a good example of this. More broadly, with the introduction of ICSs, now may be the time to consider how the provision of children's community health services could be situated effectively within a system of placed based leadership that has children at its heart. The NHS is a fantastic institution but there are many challenges it needs to prioritise. As leaders in place, the DCSs could lead an integrated approach to community services for children and a mechanism such as a 'Better Care Fund' for children could bring that to life.

As directors of children's services, we are ambitious to our core for children, it's why we do what we do. Yet, at times it can feel like we are swimming against the tide as there are system factors that simply act as barriers and hinder what we can do for the benefit of children. Let's take regulation for example. Josh described it as a Jenga tower, to me it feels like a patchwork of often conflicting legislation and statutory guidance that we add to, yet never take away from, with little or no regard to the resources with which we operate or more importantly the needs and wishes of children in the 21st century. There is a need for a fundamental regulatory review across the breadth of children's services, including the role of the inspectorates, that focuses on the impact that regulation has on the daily lived experiences and outcomes for children and young people.

The negative impact of legislation and regulation is particularly true for those children in care who have the most complex needs, the seemingly unstoppable rise in the number of applications to the National Deprivation of Liberty Court and the continued use of unregistered placements for some of our most vulnerable children evidence this. The solutions to these challenges cannot have a single agency focus, and we need to work from the principle of form follows function – what is the purpose of residential care and what is the role of partners in supporting this.

As I draw this to a close, I wanted to finish on a positive note by focusing on the workforce. The instability and churn in the social work workforce in recent months is unlike anything I've known in my career and I'd like to credit DfE for the work they've done with us in record time to act on addressing the pernicious practices of some social work agencies. The consultation on a set of measures to address this is still open but we're hoping the result will soon provide for a level of stability in the workforce that will really benefit children and families.

The measures to rebalance the system and encourage the focus towards the family help end of the spectrum, along with broadening the mix of professionals who can provide the right support at the right time to families is also welcome. It will allow us to offer help at an earlier stage while recognising the skills we have across the whole of the workforce to do

that. This does lead us on to the issue of multi-agency working and how we draw health, police and schools meaningfully into the model with a key line of sight and accountability back to the DCS as the strategic lead. But that's a conversation for another day!

Finally, I want to recognise our greatest asset, the workforce right across the spectrum of children's services, from social workers and family support teams to school improvement advisors, childcare staff, SENDCOs, those who look after the children in our care, teachers and youth justice staff, to name but a few. They've been through so much in recent years but keep showing up for children every day against a backdrop of an endless cycle of reviews, restructures and reforms and of course, most recently, the pandemic. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of staff up and down the country have chosen to dedicate their professional lives to helping children and families overcome adversity and reach their potential. They are the best of us and deserve all of our thanks. Too often this is missing in public, and yes in political, discourse but I pay tribute to you all, and to my fellow DCSs and other senior leaders and elected members in local authorities trying so hard to secure the best deal for the communities we serve.

It is traditional to end with a literary quote. As I don't have a library of classic novels like many of my illustrious predecessors, I want to return to the theme of inequality with a modern quote from Fiona Hill whose 2021 book is entitled 'There is nothing for you here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century'. Fiona was brought up in a mining family in County Durham before rising to be at the centre of global affairs as a member of the US National Security Council. She will also be shortly returning to her roots as Chancellor of Durham University.

To quote, "I applied to Oxford in the 1980s and was invited to interview. It was like a scene from Billy Elliot: people were making fun of me for my accent and the way I was dressed. It was the most awful experience I had ever had in my life."

Fiona moved to the United States to find opportunity. I'd like to think things have moved on from that time but how do we ensure the next generation of Fiona's growing up now in our former pit villages, and places like that across the country, have the same opportunities as their peers from more affluent backgrounds.

Thank you, I'd now like to handover to Indra Morris, Director General, Families at the Department for Education to say a few words.