

James Bullion

ADASS President Inaugural Speech NCASC

Welcome to NCASC 2020 on behalf of ADASS, ADCS, and the LGA. I am James Bullion, President of ADASS. I hope you enjoy our online conference over the next 3 days, and that you find it useful. Please engage with us on social media.

When we left this conference in Bournemouth 12 months ago, who could have imagined that my first duty here today would be to pay tribute to all those who have died from the effects of a deadly virus. It is an almost unthinkable horror.

Our hearts go out to the families of the tens of thousands of people who are no longer with us, including the loved ones of more than 600 care and health workers who have paid the ultimate price in their dedication to supporting people with social care needs. We recognise their sacrifice.

And we pay tribute, to all our care staff, in residential settings, and in the community, and to our social workers who have done so much this year to keep care and support services going, and to safeguard people. Many of us have been able to work from home through the crisis, care workers have not enjoyed that option. With compassion and courage, they have gone out day after day, night after night, to ensure the health and wellbeing of others.

To all of them, from all of us, I say ... Thank you.

You know, we used to look forward to 2020 as a watershed year – a target for the delivery of change in all those thinktank reports that played on the idea of ‘20/20 vision’ in their snappy titles. Well here we are, and it’s not quite what those reports had in mind. We find ourselves engaged in a grim and deadly struggle just to sustain our services, overdue for reform and flawed as they sometimes now are, just to protect people’s health and wellbeing.

And plainly there is no lasting relief coming any time soon. After a brief and welcome respite from the worst of things in the late summer, we are now dragged into the vortex of the second wave of COVID, and we will need to summon again all our organisation, our strength, our resilience – and yes, all our kindness.

Because however bad things may get in the coming months, we must never lose sight of that essential quality – which underpins everything we do in this thing we call social care.

These can be frightening times for some of the people we support - often isolated, lonely and sometimes uncomprehending of what is going on in the world. Not understanding why they cannot go to their club as normal, or why their family cannot visit them where they live, or why everyone is wearing masks. So for them, a reassuring word, a smile, a simple touch on the arm can mean a very great deal indeed.

Kindness comes as second nature to caregivers, we know, but such has been the toll of COVID and so huge the demands we have had to make of our people – that some are understandably finding it tough to keep going and to sustain their response. I’ve been very struck by the thinking of Aisha Ahmad, a Canadian academic who specialises in international security and disaster relief, but in recent weeks she has become a kind of online counselor to those around the world who are struggling with the psychological impact of COVID-19.

She says that the six-month point in any sustained crisis is always difficult. We have all adjusted to the ‘new normal’, but might now feel we are running out of steam. Yet, at best, we may be only a third of the way through this marathon. How do we keep going?

What we need to do, Ahmad tells us, is stick to our routines and obligations but make sure we get some shore leave if we can, look after our minds and bodies, be realistic about what we can achieve in the face of seemingly overwhelming need, and try to rise above the fear. Oh – and avoid social media, though that may be more difficult for some of us than for others.

And what's good for paid carers must also be good for unpaid carers. Families and friends who are supporting others have been under enormous pressure. We must not forget them, we must act to support them. Carers UK estimates that an additional 5 million people have taken on caring responsibilities because of the dislocation of usual services, and growing needs, meaning that more than 13 million of us are acting as informal carers in some way. Many of those providing the most intensive support badly need a break – and we have to find ways of offering practical respite to help them.

So greater support for informal carers, baked into the system, is core to what we must see in the long-promised reform of social care that the crisis has shown is so badly needed. And we owe it, as a society, to carers, to people in need, and to our paid staff to start delivering that reform now – no more procrastination - as recognition of everything we have done and are doing to sustain the system.

A call for better pay and conditions, as part of an overall workforce strategy for the sector, is one of the nine statements ADASS published in the summer as our idea of a framework for reform. Our colleagues in the LGA have tabled their own principles, with much in common. In fact, Social Care Futures, SCIE, TLAP, RCOT, Skills for Care, the Care Providers Association, the Care and Support Alliance, Unions, Select Committees – they show remarkable consistency in what is needed. We are not precious about our agenda – the important thing is to get on with sorting out social care, for all, once and for all.

And when we say 'for all', we mean that reform must be comprehensive, and not a narrow template that simply addresses the funding of residential care for older people.

And when we say for all, we mean tackle inequality. COVID has exposed inequality - the far greater vulnerability, disadvantage, and discrimination of people from low-income households, of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, of people living with disabilities.

But our response has also shown that when you target disadvantaged people with greater support – a roof over the head of a homeless person, a focus on the needs of people with drug and alcohol issues, when you give poor families extra help by way of universal credit - the outcomes are usually positive. That should be core to reform.

It's disappointing that the Chancellor has decided to have a one-year spending review later this month, and not the full three-year exercise that had been planned. ADASS had called for a funding settlement for two years for adult social care to bring some stability to the system and push back the cliff-edge spending reductions that so many of our members fear they will be obliged to make. We acknowledge the one-off funding from Government in this year. But we still need that future stability to ensure continuity of services this winter in the pandemic and next year before any reform might be implemented locally.

COVID has reminded us all of the importance of locality - giving local experts the power and resources to do what's best for their communities. It's taken the Government a while to get to that understanding, and it's done so only at a considerable and lamentable cost in outcomes, but there's an obvious read-across to the care reform debate. Simplistic, top-down national solutions don't work.

Local leadership counts. In my backyard, Norfolk, it has been the collaboration between care, housing, health, and community leaders that allowed for the safe discharge of thousands, a single

response to rough sleeping, the local sourcing of PPE. Let's not wait for that willingness to dissipate, lets reform now, and integrate, and account locally.

While speaking of local leadership, I must thank Andrew Proctor the leader of the county council in Norfolk, and Bill Borrett his cabinet member, for granting me the time and giving me the support to fulfill my ADASS presidency. And thanks too to Newton for sponsoring this conference and of course they too recognise the importance of leadership.

So - although 2020 has turned out to be such an annus horribilis, it is my absolute privilege to be serving as ADASS president. It is a year that has shown the social care family at its very best, rising to the challenge with utter dedication, flexibility, and ingenuity, and with sheer, downright bravery

Our colleagues at the sharp end have already gone the extra mile for us, but we need to ask them to go again. With our experience of the first wave of the virus, we can go into the winter months with greater confidence that there will be reliable PPE (and enough of it), hope for routine testing (and something approaching enough of that), and better funding.

As we consider the next COVID steps and reform, we must put people and their lived experience at the heart of it. We cannot isolate people away, or separate people from their loved ones through blanket approaches. As we lock down tomorrow we need corridors of care that cross the divides. As the approach in France shows us, this need not mean a complete ban on care home visiting which we know is so important to families, especially in the run-up to Christmas. We urge ministers to introduce rapid arrangements for designated visitors and financial help to create Covid-secure visiting areas.

Above all, and to finish, it is our values that will sustain us through the winter. The Covid crisis has opened many people's eyes to social care, and they like what they see - the compassion, the commitment, the concern for those often on the fringes of society, the protection for freedom and independence. As we redouble our efforts to face down this diabolical disease, we must never lose sight of those values. They are what we are all about. Thank you.

I now hand over to my colleague Jenny Coles to address the conference.