

Where every person can belong

Rachael Wardell says ending the two-child benefit cap is a welcome step. Mental health must now become a national priority

Recently, I had the privilege of joining colleagues from across the country in Bournemouth for the National Children and Adult Services Conference (NCASC) 2025.

NCASC is always a highlight in our shared calendar, an opportunity to reflect, debate, learn from one another and ensure that children and families remain at the centre of our national conversations.

In my opening remarks I spoke about the complex and intersecting challenges facing children, their families and the children's services that support them. Recent hearings at the UK Covid Inquiry confirmed what many of us experienced in real time: children were not at the heart of the Government's pandemic response. They were denied the most basic building blocks of childhood, such as playing with friends or visiting grandparents. Such lost experiences cannot ever be recovered and the consequences are visible in record levels of absence and exclusion from school and in rising mental health needs.

Mental health must now take its rightful place as a national priority. Similarly, deprivation remains a pervasive injustice, with 4.5 million children living in poverty today.

The chancellor's commitment to end the two-child benefit cap was very welcome news to receive while NCASC was in session. I would urge government to go further with a bold, long-term child-poverty strategy that truly transforms childhoods for the better.

These themes echoed through conversations and the conference programme. We heard from the minister for children and families, HM Chief Inspector of Ofsted, and the Department for Education also led a session on the Families First Partnership Programme. Workshops explored inclusive education, domestic abuse, learning disabilities, regional care co-operatives, child poverty, sustainable funding and more.

We are living through a period of unprecedented change, with rapid and overlapping reform, legislative changes, reviews and restructures, overlaid with fundamental funding pressures. Each issue is worthy of our focus, but without a national strategy for children that brings coherence and clarity, we risk diluting our efforts rather than amplifying them.

I look forward to continuing the conversations we began in Bournemouth, across central and local government, across regions and across disciplines.

Leadership in children's services is about more than education and safeguarding – it is about shaping the kind of society our children will inherit.

By finding ways to lead inclusively, even in the face of challenges, we send a powerful message: that every child matters, every voice counts and every person belongs. ▶

Rachael Wardell is ADCS president 2025-2026

The Government published its *Child Poverty Strategy* as this column went to press

Cheshire and Merseyside are teaming up with local partners – and with Sir Michael Marmot and the Institute of Health Equity – to show how devolution can hardwire health equity into every local decision, say **Steve Rotheram** and **Cllr Louise Gittins**

As regional leaders, we are often asked what devolution really means in practice. For us, it is about more than shifting powers from Whitehall to communities. It is about improving people's lives. And there is no clearer measure of success than health.

The reality is that across Cheshire and Merseyside, people's health and life chances still depend too much on where they live.

In some communities, residents can expect to live up to 15 years less than those in more affluent areas. More than 111,000 children are growing up in poverty – two-thirds in working families. These inequalities are not inevitable, they are shaped by social and economic factors.

That is why, together, we recently met with epidemiologist and public health expert, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, to explore how we can use the opportunities of devolution to hardwire health equity into every aspect of local decision-making.

From treating illness to creating wellbeing

The Marmot approach challenges us to think differently about health, not simply as an NHS issue, but as something determined by the homes we live in, the jobs we do, the education we receive and the communities we belong to.

Through All Together Fairer, Cheshire and Merseyside have already embraced these principles. Since becoming a Marmot Community in 2019, the nine local authorities, the NHS and the voluntary sector have worked side-by-side to understand what drives inequality and to align action across systems. We have made real progress, but we know we need to go further and faster.

As local leaders, we know that devolution offers the next big opportunity to do just that, giving local areas the levers and flexibilities to create the conditions for places and people to flourish.

With the Liverpool City Region's established powers and Cheshire and Warrington moving towards a mayoral combined authority, we can harness devolution to make health equity one of the golden threads running through all our policies.

A shared ambition for fairer places

Our joint ambition is clear: to make Cheshire and Merseyside the fairest, healthiest and most inclusive place to live, work and do business. That means moving from words to action.

We are developing a whole-system programme that tackles the social determinants of health at every level. We want to see All Together Fairer Neighbourhoods that empower communities to take local action on the issues that matter most to them.

We are prioritising healthy homes and working to ensure no child goes without a warm bed. We are working to expand the Cradle to Career approach across all Liverpool City Region local authorities, giving every child the best possible start in life. And, we are committed to building an economy based on fair employment, mental wellbeing and inclusive growth.

Through Adult Skills Fund, Liverpool City Region supports tens of thousands of residents to gain qualifications and build successful careers.

In partnership with local employers, we are strengthening Fair Employment Charters, promoting the Real Living Wage and supporting residents experiencing long-term unemployment into good quality work.

Improving access and affordability of public transport



Delivering

connects residents to jobs, education, public services and leisure – while simultaneously supporting the ambitions of improved physical activity, air quality and road safety. There are opportunities to go further under bus franchising, creating an integrated transport network that keeps communities connected and our economies thriving.

Building on the excellent initiative of our local authorities, we are identifying opportunities to scale public health interventions at regional level, including through healthier advertising standards.

The new Pride in Place programme, £2m a year for 10 years, offers a chance to support hyper-local communities to shape their own health and wellbeing.

By bringing together residents, local MPs, the council, businesses and community organisations to decide local priorities and by embedding Marmot principles into that process, we can help ensure resources are directed where they will have the greatest long-term impact.

Using devolved powers to improve lives

Devolution gives us the ability to join up decisions that were previously fragmented, linking housing to health, skills to



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opportunity and transport to environmental justice. It also gives us the flexibility to respond to local needs rather than national templates.

We welcome that the Government sees a more active role for mayors in health and in supporting the national ambition to halve the healthy life expectancy gap between our least and most deprived communities.

As we move forward, we will shape how the new health improvement and health inequalities duty is implemented, ensuring it reflects the reality of our communities, supports the work already under way through All Together Fairer and fosters a whole-system approach.

Health equity as a shared mission

In the Liverpool City Region, we are taking steps towards becoming a Marmot City Region, ensuring that tackling health inequalities is hardwired into everything we do.

In Cheshire and Warrington, we are building the foundations of a new devolved system with health equity at its heart.

We know this is a long-term commitment. Tackling health inequalities will take sustained focus, shared

leadership and a willingness to work differently. But the evidence is clear: good health is not only a moral imperative; it is an economic one. Healthier people are more able to work, learn and contribute and healthier places attract investment and talent.

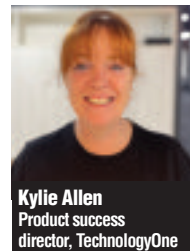
Our vision is simple: a Cheshire and Merseyside where the place you are born no longer determines the life you live. A region where every community can thrive and where devolution delivers fair and inclusive growth.

Working together with our amazing partners, including the NHS Integrated Care Board, directors of public health, and partners across the public, private, voluntary and academic sectors – alongside Sir Michael Marmot and the Institute of Health Equity – we believe we can make that vision a reality. Because ultimately, the success of devolution will not be measured by the powers transferred, but by the number of lives improved. ▶

Steve Rotheram is the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region and Cllr Louise Gittins is the leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council

Turning unstructured data into confident compliance

Councils across the UK are under mounting pressure to respond quickly and accurately to Freedom of Information (FoI) and Data Subject Access Requests (DSARs). With the Information Commissioner's Office signalling an increased focus on local government compliance, many authorities anticipate a surge in regulatory notices – and the reputational impact of non-compliance within the community is significant.



Kylie Allen
Product success director, TechnologyOne

Yet the sheer volume of information generated through modern digital collaboration has made timely, accurate responses harder than ever. Content is spread across multiple SharePoint sites, shared drives, inboxes, disparate systems and even physical storage. Documents are often duplicated, inconsistently tagged or stored without clear ownership, forcing staff to chase versions, permissions or naming conventions simply to locate what they need.

The result is operational inefficiency, missed deadlines, and increased exposure to enforcement action under both the FOI Act and UK GDPR. Many councils are also having to refuse requests under Section 12 of the FOI Act when the time required to locate information exceeds the 18-hour cost threshold – an outcome that frustrates citizens and erodes trust.

This is where a modern approach to information management becomes essential. TechnologyOne's Enterprise Content Management (ECM) platform works alongside existing tools to provide the control and consistency councils need. With ECM SharePoint Connect, documents created or stored in SharePoint are synchronised into ECM, automatically inheriting the correct classification, security, retention rules and audit trails required for FOI and GDPR compliance.

The dual benefit is clear: councils maintain the collaborative flexibility of SharePoint while gaining a robust governance framework required for confident compliance. Dashboards and audit trails offer transparency over FOI and DSAR workflows, managers can monitor progress in real time, and records are discoverable and defensible when requests arrive.

The challenge isn't that councils lack data. It's that so much of it is unstructured, and stored without consistent metadata, ownership, or retention rules.

In a world where transparency and trust matter more than ever, strong information governance is more than a compliance exercise – it's fundamental to protecting community confidence and delivering accountable public service. ■

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