

Rachel Dickinson inaugural Presidential address

(11 April 2019)

Thank you, Stuart.

Well, another year has passed, and another President stands before you – excited and a little trepidatious. I am the 14th person to have the honour of calling themselves President of ADCS; and just as the 13 who have come before me, I intend to start my speech with some thank-yous.

I would like to thank the Leader of the fantastic Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sir Steve Houghton and my two Cabinet members Councillor Bruff and Councillor Cheetham not only for being here to cheer me on today, but also for their support in allowing me to do this important national role. I'd also like to thank my Chief Executive Diana Terris for her support. As some of you may know, Diana is one of those relatively rare creatures – a Chief Exec who has been a DCS. Diana retires soon. However, I consider myself extraordinarily fortunate as I am about to have another Chief Exec who was a DCS, Sarah Norman. Actually, my Chief Exec in my first ever DCS role, was also a former DCS herself, Sheila Lock. Weird how that's panned out!

To my senior staff team, Margaret and Mel I extend my sincere thanks as you are the ones who'll be doing extra work. And my PA Andrea who is simply superb. To all of the Barnsley folk I say thank you for allowing me the opportunity to play on a national stage.

I think that the job of DCS is the best but possibly the toughest job in the world and I should know having done it for pretty much a decade now. Exerting influence often without hard power, persuading, cajoling, charming partners to align their priorities with ours and put children first. It's tough stuff systems leadership and you need good, supportive peer networks to help you through. I've got that in spades in my Yorkshire & Humberside colleagues, many of whom are here today – both serving and retired. It's lovely to see you all. I must say, I did think about delivering this speech in Yorkshire dialect, but then I thought *naw lass, tha' best not*.

Supportive colleagues, bosses and peers are incredibly important; so too is a supportive, caring home environment. The support I have at home especially from Gail is truly amazing. And then there's the ADCS staff team – few in number, but they make up for that by being committed, and diligent.

One more thank-you, well, two more thank-yous. Alison Michalska has just finished her year as Immediate Past President. ADCS has really benefited Alison, from four years of your service to the President's team. What a star! You are a great leader and a good friend.

And Stuart...what a year you had as President. If you'll excuse the pun, clear lines of sight characterised your Presidency. You maintained visibility on the work started by

Alison on a country that works for all children. You have relentlessly kept children's services funding pressures high on everyone's agenda, whilst being equally clear, nay stropky, about high needs overspends that are about to bring many councils to their knees. And, you have continued to shine a light into the murky depths of child and family poverty. I fully intend to continue in this vein as you will hear in a few moments when I discuss my policy priorities for the coming year. I must tell you colleagues, that Stuart has taken his commitment to a truly extraordinary level by flying back early from his skiing holiday in Switzerland in order to be here today. Thank you, Stuart, for all you've done.

Some of you may remember from Stuart's speech last year, his mention of the fabled Cohort 5 of DCSs on the much-missed DCS Leadership Programme. Stuart and I were part of that cohort and I can see several others in the audience today, including Jenny Coles. Jenny of course is my Vice President...smiling and looking very chilled now, but a year passes very quickly, Jenny! I'm looking forward to working with you.

Those of us who benefitted from them know that these leadership programmes for serving and aspirant DCSs were superb, in part because the organisation delivering them – initially the National College of School Leadership and later The Staff College – was close to but not cosy with the sector, committed to systems leadership and not in the business to make profits.

ADCS has been urging the DfE to look again at investing in systems leadership development programmes. I want to take this opportunity to encourage DfE colleagues to work at pace now given the Secretary of State made a commitment to us last summer. I know we share concerns about the pipeline for new DCSs, so let's get this sorted.

2019 is a year of interesting anniversaries – perhaps most significantly for us, it marks 30 years since Royal Assent was given to The Children Act 1989. I shall be reflecting on this more in my speech at ADCS annual conference in July. And of course it will be 15 years since Royal Assent for The Children Act 2004, that seminal piece of legislation that created, amongst other things, the statutory role of the director of children's services. And that brings me to my policy priorities for the coming year.

I will **re-assert the systems leadership role of the DCS as champion for children** and I intend to challenge central government, in the form of the DfE and beyond, to do the same at a national level. I shall be doing this through a relentless focus on children's lived experiences and their outcomes. The reality of children's lives today. Nowhere is the need for local and national systems leadership more relevant than in policy and practice around SEND. The DCS is uniquely centred in the place they work, to connect the systems together in the interests of children. I think someone in government should do the same. I mean no disrespect to Minister Zahawi, but I do think we should have a Secretary of State for Children.

I hope too that we will see the long-awaited re-setting of the role of the local authority in education. A decade of education reforms have left us with one of the most

autonomous school systems in the world. But that autonomy has also led to the fragmentation of responsibilities for school performance. Any reasonable person would, and does, expect their local authority to have a clear, unambiguous role in relation to all the schools in its area given our wide-ranging statutory duties to promote high educational standards, make sure there are enough local places to meet demand and that all local children have fair access to a place at a good local school. Yet local authorities are not adequately funded for these duties.

I shall not shrink from re-voicing the lost language of closing the gap in children's outcomes. I feel passionately that the best way to do this is to **incentivise inclusivity in our mainstream schools**. We know that pupil disengagement results from:

- a narrowing of the curriculum, coupled with inflexible and in some cases draconian behaviour policies, leading to the shocking increases in the number of pupils excluded from school;
- the use of illegal off-rolling practices in some schools to 'socially engineer' the outcomes of league tables in a high-stakes inspection regime; and,
- the increased use of specialist non-mainstream provision to support pupils with mental health problems, ASD and ADHD.

Add to that cuts to youth service budgets and the result, as we are seeing every day on our TVs, is a rise in serious youth crime and increased numbers of young people being criminally exploited. As we know, young people excluded or otherwise missing from mainstream schools are one of the vulnerable groups that criminal gangs target for exploitation.

Frankly, given all this, I'm only surprised that people are surprised at the explosion of serious violent crime amongst young people. The Prime Minister has said, "we cannot arrest our way out of this situation". I would add that the proposal to place a new legal duty on specific organisations to have due regard to the prevention and tackling of serious violence isn't the solution either. The proposal is not about placing a duty on individual frontline professionals, thank goodness, but that's where the pressure will be felt – social workers, teachers, youth workers, public health nurses, A&E staff, and police officers. I want to pay tribute to these frontline workers, working with passion every day to get it right for children in increasingly difficult circumstances. Everyone who works with young people already has "due regard" to their protection, safety and wellbeing.

So, please, let's not take any more money away from services designed to support vulnerable children, young people and their families. You'll have gathered from this that one of my other priorities is to continue pressing the government for a **sustainable long-term funding settlement for children's services**. No more 'funny money', please. No more diversions down the cul-de-sac of variations in cost and demand leading to the false conclusion that efficiency will fund the gap austerity has created. There is quite simply not enough money in the system. £2 billion pounds might steady the ship in the coming year for one-year. And, £3 billion pounds might help to kick-start re-investment in services.

Another of my priorities is to keep banging the drum and banging it loudly about the disgraceful levels of **child poverty** in this country today. A couple of weeks ago, the Department for Work and Pensions released government's own figures showing 'absolute child poverty' had increased to 3.7 million. Responding to the release of these figures, a 'government spokesperson' said: "*Tackling poverty will always be a priority for this Government, and we take these numbers extremely seriously...We are looking at what more can be done to help the most vulnerable and improve their life chances.*"

I warmly welcome the government's commitment to address the situation.

There are different ways of 'measuring' poverty, but I think we can all agree that around four million children live in poverty today and this time next year, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, there will be five million, the majority of whom live in working households. I would like Parliament to give as much time, energy and tactical thinking to addressing the child poverty crisis, because that's what it is, as they have been doing over Brexit. Please, please, engage with ADCS as part of finding a sustainable solution. A whole system approach is required. Perhaps if we could replicate the ferocity with which the British government has fought to avoid a return to a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, to tackling the national disgrace of food banks and holiday hunger clubs, we'd have a good chance of averting the human and financial costs of poverty.

With the best will in the world, even the best schools, and we have many great schools, cannot mitigate against the effects of poverty. And poverty as we know can lead to an increased risk of strained family relationships or worse, domestic abuse, which in turn increase the risk of poor-quality parenting, parental mental ill-health and emotional distress. The cumulative impact of these factors affect children's wellbeing and thus their outcomes and future life chances. All of which translate to rising demand for statutory interventions from children's social care.

I'd like to pick up briefly on something I mentioned earlier in this speech, 2019 is a year of significant anniversaries.

The Children Act 1989 received royal assent 30 years ago. I want to use my year as President to celebrate the successes of the Act and to reflect upon the modern challenges facing children, families, social work and children's services that the Act simply could not have foreseen. Along with my fellow ADCS members we will be urging a reclaiming of the core principles of the Act in respect of prevention, with adequate new funding attached, of course!

It's also 50 years this year since penguin books first published Barry Hines' novel *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Barry was born and bred in a small village on the outskirts of Barnsley. His novel crackles with local colour, beauty and some choice northern working-class phrases. At the time, and possibly even still now, the North was thought of as a place filled with dark satanic mills, mines, pits and factories. Hines' novel describes Barnsley surrounded by beautiful Pennine countryside, but it also depicts the less than bucolic life of a young working-class lad, Billy Casper. I've

recently re-acquainted myself with this novel and it made me wonder just how different are things today for working-class youngsters than they were for Billy 50 years ago, not just in Barnsley but all over the country?

Billy lived in poverty, despite coming from a working household. No carpets or central heating in Billy's home.

Billy sometimes attended a secondary modern school. That would be a comprehensive Academy school now although the founding principles of a 'comprehensive' education have not seriously been pursued by any government over the intervening decades. For a youngster like Billy, who could not be described as 'academic', school is a disenfranchising experience. He does have aspiration and ambition though – to train a young kestrel which requires him to master technical language and the skills of falconry. Today the curriculum in school is narrowing and focussed on academic attainment, no GCSE in nature studies for modern-day Billy Caspers.

The lived experiences of some of our children and families today, wherever they live across the country, are not a million miles away from Billy's. The South Yorkshire of today has new opportunities, having been transformed with new industries, but are they opportunities for Billy?

Billy experiences domestic and emotional abuse, largely at the hands of his older brother Jud. The hunger pangs in Billy's belly drive him to steal. Are we sure that our response today would be to consider Billy or Jud as children first and criminals second? I think we are much, much better at understanding the impacts of adverse early childhood experiences but I do worry that the Billys and Juds of today face multiple risk of exploitation in this digital age – complex, contextual, extra-familial risks in addition to their poverty, uncertain job prospects, narrow school curricular, less money in schools for pastoral care, less money in wider services to intervene early to provide support, more fixed term exclusions from schools. I do worry that despite our schools being truly aspirational they are hampered from delivering that aspiration to all children, to children like Billy. So what of their life chances?

If it's a while since you read this novel, I commend a re-reading of it to you. Or watch the Ken Loach film version *Kez*. which also celebrates its 50th birthday this year.

Well friends, it's time for me to draw my speech to a close.

I'm really looking forward to my year as ADCS President and to building on the excellent work of my predecessors.

I am delighted that Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary at the DfE has been able to join us and say a few words. As many of you will know the word 'Secretary' comes from the Latin for 'keeper of secrets'. I'm looking forward to this...Jonathan, over to you.

Thank you.