

Alison Michalska inaugural Presidential speech

(6 April 2017)

Thanks Dave.

On 5 February 2007, in this very room, the association of directors of children's services was formally launched. Those who've been around long enough to remember that launch, will know that in that first year we had a joint presidency arrangement – John Freeman & John Coughlan, the pioneer presidents. Apparently, the only reason why we didn't continue with the double act arrangement is that there's only one badge of office! I am therefore the twelfth person to hold the office of ADCS President, and I, unlike some who shall remain nameless, will wear the badge.

In the time honoured tradition, I'd like to make some thank yous. Firstly, to Nottingham City Council - I would like to thank the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jon Collins, the Lead Member Cllr David Mellen and portfolio holder for schools Cllr Sam Webster both of whom have taken the time to be here today. I would like to thank the Chief Executive Ian Curryer who is one of those unusual creatures, a chief exec who has also been a DCS. Thank you to all of you for generously allowing me time away from the ranch to carry out my ADCS duties.

To my staff at Nottingham City Council, many of whom I'm delighted to say are here today. And of course, thank you to Judith and Michelle who support me to get to the right place at the right time with the right briefings.

To my husband, Jon, my children and step children, two of whom, Hannah and Thom are here today with their respective other halves, the 5 grandchildren, and my parents, without whom, obviously, I wouldn't be here today! Their support is crucial; the fun they bring a welcome distraction from work; their patience unending; their love unconditional, which is all anyone could ask for really! Of course, I realise that I must share Jon's affection with his beloved Leicester City Football Club and graciously accept second place when required....

Thanks also to my regional DCS colleagues in the East Midlands, many of whom are here today. They are a supportive bunch.

.....and of course, to Dave Hill, who has been a thoughtful and calm President and who has given so generously of his time to the Association. Dave has an ability to coin a phrase but I fear he is now living to regret it. "Knitting it all together" is one such 'Dave phrase' aptly used to describe many a scenario in the leadership of children's services. Well, earlier this morning, whilst we were in closed session, we made a little gift to Dave of knitting needles, so keep on knitting it all together, Dave.

Many of you will know that it has become something of a tradition for the ADCS President to 'go on tour' visiting each of the nine regions at least once and sometimes twice throughout the year. As Dave's Vice President, I joined him on some of his tour dates. Now, it's not very rock 'n roll but I take my thermal travel cup

with me on these journeys, which I top up with lovely local authority coffee at the end of each regional meeting, before Dave and I leave for the station. Concerned at Dave's envy of my thermal travel cup, we bought him one of his own – that's two presents! Our generosity knows no bounds in ADCS.

Seriously Dave, thank you, you've been a star. I look forward to working with Stuart Gallimore, DCS East Sussex as my Vice President – I can only hope that he feels as welcome and supported as he joins the Presidential team as you made me feel Dave.

Now my friends, I would like to give you a brief flavour of my presidential policy priorities for the coming year. Firstly, **Education policy.**

It is time for a **reset of the role of the local authority** – I am clear that local authorities play a crucially important role in shaping the places that they are responsible for. The LA is uniquely placed to take a holistic view of the needs of its citizens – their work, leisure, education and skills needs. Their childcare, transport and travel needs. Their health, wellbeing and social care needs Their community, religious and cultural needs...you get my drift here colleagues. I work for Nottingham City Council, me and my colleagues care about the city, we want it to be as good as it possibly can be – a great place to live, to study, to work and to play. All but one of secondary schools and 60% of our primary schools in the city are academies and the people who run those institutions are great people who want the best for the kids on their school's roll. And therein lies the rub – as systems leaders, we have responsibility in councils for every child on our patch. Newer DCSs entering the profession more recently might be forgiven for thinking theirs was a relatively limited role in education and with schools. But it isn't. We need to make sure that the leadership development offer to aspiring DCSs and to newly elected Lead Members covers this side of the business as much as the social care side of the business.

Education should be more inclusive: what is the offer to our most vulnerable pupils? How might we and Ofsted incentivise schools, **all** schools to be inclusive, inclusive of children with learning difficulties, special needs, disabilities and inclusive of those children who for a variety of reasons may not be the highest of academic achievers? That inclusivity task will be much more difficult if we are to have new selective free schools. A retrograde step in most people's view.

I welcome HMCI Amanda Spielman's recent announcement of an investigation into the **curriculum**. We've had years of continuous change to the structure of our schools and the qualifications for which our young people study. It's high time we had a look at the content, whether it's fit for purpose, whether it's going to equip our children and young people to thrive, not just survive, in the 21st century.

I also welcome the news that sex and relationship education is to become compulsory in all secondary schools and age-appropriate relationship education in

all primary schools. This will be an important development which will hopefully contribute to building resilience in children and young people, which they need in bucket-loads if they are to tackle the risks facing young people today that frankly we wouldn't have dreamt about when we were children - online grooming and exploitation, 'sexting' and cyber bullying.

Secondly, reducing distant placements to meet the needs of children and young people better by commissioning more placement capacity closer to home. In my region, the East Midlands, we've done a really great piece of work - she says, modestly – on reducing the need to place young people at distance in residential special schools. We have also had a regional commissioning framework for residential care for children that has both capped prices and seen a successful partnership with a private provider to expand provision in the areas of highest need. This has proven cost effective but, more importantly, better for our children. What this means is that as corporate parents we can have our children closer to home. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm going to stop being **corporate aunt** to children in care placed in Nottingham by other local authorities – DCSs are nothing if not generous! That's a great phrase isn't it – corporate aunt, coined by my lovely colleague Rachel Dickinson, DCS Barnsley, and mercilessly stolen by me. I like it because it encapsulates not only the systems leadership role, but also the moral responsibility that DCSs and Lead Members have for all children on their patches; it also describes the collective sense of responsibility we feel for the 11 and a half million children and young people in England.

The DfE's Fostering Stocktake will play an important part in reducing distant placements too– so bring it on, please! 75% of children in care are in foster placements, many of those placements are out of the immediate local authority area. Sometimes that's necessary and a good thing for the child concerned; often it's because of a lack of more local placement capacity. IFAs play an important role in this market, but I think we have to look long and hard at the costs of fostering placements.

I wonder if any of you watched Dave's latest appearance before the Education Select Committee? The Committee was doing its own inquiry into fostering and our Immediate Past President gave evidence alongside Cllr Watts from LGA and a Trade Union person, the latter of whom suggested that it would be a great idea if there was a national register of all foster carers from which LAs could select a carer for their child. Dave and Cllr Watts were polite but firm in their rebuttal of such nonsense – we need our children in care to be closer to their communities, their extended families, friendship networks – not scattered hither and yon across the country. There are other slightly mad notions floating around the fostering world too that may well lead us down the wrong path. There are risks in the over-professionalisation,

specialisation or unionisation of foster carers. What I find irritating about these kind of notions, is that they take no account of whether a highly professionalised, specialist, unionised foster carer workforce would improve the outcomes for the children they care for!

Welfare placements in Secure Children's Homes are almost de facto going to be out of area placements. Bless those 13 local authorities that run secure children's homes. We've been trying for more than two years to get government to help the sector to share the financial risks of running this very specialist provision. Currently, demand far outstrips supply, 15 referrals for every bed. Some of our number within ADCS are working on building a regional business case for increasing bed capacity in secure children's homes. Seems to me that's the kind of innovation that would be of benefit to the whole sector.

Now, this wouldn't be an ADCS President's speech without mentioning **the funding gap in children's services** – which is estimated to be in the region of £1.9billion by 2020. We've cut costs by innovating, re-designing and reconfiguring our services – not least of which has been early help services, once abundant now thinly spread – we've merged back office functions and we increasingly collaborate across local authorities to create economies of scale and shape markets. But still councils up and down the land are grappling with unimaginably difficult decisions when faced with this funding gap.

I don't know about you but I sometimes find really big numbers, with lots of zeros a bit difficult to conceptualise. So, let me put it like this. HS2 is going to cost £55.7 billion for 119 miles of track. The money that would be saved by cutting out about 5 miles of that track would plug the funding gap in children's services.

The Prime Minister wants the UK to be "...a country that works for everyone...". Seems to me like it would be a pretty good start if we agree what a **country that works for children**, might look like. Today, in 2017 in this country, there are 4 million children living in poverty, that's almost one third of the total child population. Food banks in every supermarket, whatever next?

This is a pivotal moment in our nation's relationship to its children. There are more children in our society that at any time before and yet they are at risk of being short changed as the focus of attention, understandably has turned to the consequences of our ageing population. No matter how serious these pressures, children need us to ensure that they can thrive not just survive, that they are kept safe and have reliable, consistent access to educational opportunities.

With more children than ever before needing the support of our statutory and voluntary services, it is our duty to ensure that society prioritises its future citizens and that no child is left behind.

A country that works for children then, might be a country that actively supports its public sector agencies to engage in partnership parenting – one where not only the local authority, but police, health, probation, schools and colleges really feel and understand the part they each play in being a corporate parent for the 70 thousand plus children in our care.

It might be a country that commits a fixed percentage of its GDP to be spent on children's services – you know, like we do for defence, foreign aid and so on...

In the meantime, because it will take us a little time to become a child-friendly country, what must we in local government do?

Somehow, supported by brave elected members up and down the country, we have to reapportion our money. We have to tip the balance and invest more in preventative work to reduce demands on statutory services in the knowledge that helping early will eventually pay dividends in terms of improved outcomes for children and families. Sometimes of course, prevention won't work and children will come into care and rightly so. Now, the volume of public law care applications continues to rise. That's bad for the system but is that necessarily a bad thing for those children? We need a more nuanced debate that isn't just about measuring the outputs of the family courts by volume of care applications, but one that factors in some judgements (sorry about the pun) as to whether we are meeting children's needs better.

It's not just councils' money that needs to be invested differently, government money must too. Spend once, share the benefit many times...which brings me to think about what works in improving outcomes for children and as importantly, what doesn't work, or what doesn't work yet! So, my fourth priority is to really focus hard on **mobilising knowledge and learning from improvement and innovation, shared through regions.**

You will have heard the phrase 'data rich, intelligence poor'. I want us to be an intelligence rich sector supported but not enslaved by the data that matters. So, on the one hand, I'm intensely relaxed about many of the projects the DfE's Innovation Programme is funding. What I am bothered about though is how we mobilise the learning from those projects, and other sources of innovation and excellent practice, and share it.

We need transparency around the learning from Innovation Programme projects and I am pleased to say that we are beginning to see more of that learning being shared through the work of the Spring Consortium. We also need some clear visibility about

the undoubtedly good work of the partners in practice authorities. But, I also want us to be honest with ourselves and each other as a sector.

We need to be honest and grapple with the conundrum of 'what works'. It is rarely the case that any initiative or intervention can be simply lifted and shifted wholesale from one place where it does work, to another place, without contextualized modifications. This, I suppose, is at the heart of implementation science. So, whilst we must share learning, we need to think hard about the practicalities of replicability.

Well colleagues, I must draw my remarks to a close. I am looking forward immensely to my year as ADCS President, it's a privilege and, I'm advised, it is sometimes a pleasure too!

Thank you.

I'm delighted that Indra Morris, Director General at DfE, is going to say a few words, Indra...