

## **Jenny Coles Inaugural Presidential Written Address**

**(23 April 2020)**

Hello.

This time last year I was stood in the assembled throng listening to Rachel Dickinson's inaugural presidential address. How quickly a year passes and what extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in today. Every President of ADCS has said "we live in interesting times" but none can have been quite so interesting as the situation we find ourselves in as we deal with the enormous challenges of battling the COVID-19 pandemic. I shall return to this topic a little later. I may not be stood before you, nevertheless I am delighted to have the opportunity to make this written address. In accordance with tradition, I intend to start with some thank-yous and to say a little about my policy priorities for the coming year.



I might have entitled this written address *Hard Times, Even Greater Expectations*. As a nation we are facing hard times as every person in the county plays their part to limit the spread of the virus. In extraordinary times there are even greater expectations of local government than usual. And local government has not disappointed. Rightly, frontline healthcare workers have been the focus of the nation's attention and gratitude. But, I want to pay tribute here to local government staff and local politicians for their amazing work. I've never been prouder than I am today of being a local government officer.

### **Thank you**

Hertfordshire County Council is a brilliant place to work. A place that recognises the importance of national roles and one that encourages its staff to put themselves forward for such roles. I would like to thank the Leader of the council, Cllr. David Williams who himself holds a national role this year as Chair of the County Councils Network. I would also like to thank my two portfolio holders, Cllr. Teresa Heritage who is the Deputy Leader of the council and Executive Member for children, young people and families, and Cllr. Richard Roberts who is the Cabinet member for adult care and health. I must thank my boss too – Owen Mapley, our Chief Executive who has been really supportive of me in taking up the ADCS mantle. To my Operations Directors Marion Ingram, Simon Newland, Jo Fisher, Matt Ansell and Faisal Mir I extend my heart-felt thanks for all the extra work they'll have to do. And my PA, Jane Jenner who is quite simply excellent. I couldn't do the 'normal' day job without her support and I certainly could not do the presidency without the knowledge that Jane is keeping an eye out for me...and on me. I am grateful to each of them for their support and for allowing me the opportunity to take my turn on the national stage (even though that stage is virtual for the time being).

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be a DCS in the Eastern region where colleague directors are so supportive. In the region we have long worked collaboratively across a regional footprint, particularly on sector-led improvement. We made a commitment to each other several years ago to do all we could collectively to get every LA in the region to 'good' or better. We're always up for a challenge in the East! To continue in the vein of commitments made to each other several years ago, I also want to take this opportunity to thank my partner Robert for his support and my daughters Lucy and Emily.

Stuart Gallimore, DCS East Sussex has just finished his year as Immediate Past President. ADCS has been really fortunate to have Stuart. He did so much during his own year as President and has been a great support to Rachel during her presidency. Thank you, Stuart. And then there's Rachel Dickinson who has just concluded her presidency. I know I speak for all ADCS members and our external partners, stakeholders and friends when I say a heartfelt thanks to Rachel for her steely determination, professional and personal kindness and the thoughtful way that she led the Association throughout 2019/20. Rachel's relentless focus on the lived experiences of children and young people has brought to life for ministers, media and members the challenges facing the 4 million plus children who live in poverty. I, like you, am worried that the current emergency situation will, despite the best endeavours of everyone, plunge even more children and their families into poverty. Sadly, many more families will currently be experiencing the wholly inadequate provisions of the welfare state – long delays in receiving Universal Credit, the short-sightedness of the 'spare bedroom tax' and of course the two-child limit. Let me assure you all that I fully intend to keep child poverty high on everyone's agenda. Perhaps the privations imposed upon us all as a result of COVID-19 will make us a kinder country, a country that works for all children given it is they for whom the implications of COVID-19 will be most profound and they who are most likely to bear the long-term impacts of our battle against the virus – missing months of formal schooling, not having the opportunity to sit examinations, the as yet unknown ramifications of re-socialisation, and the impact on their mental and physical health and wellbeing of social distancing.

A final thank-you to Charlotte Ramsden. Many of you know Charlotte, who is DCS and DASS for Salford Council and until recently Charlotte chaired the ADCS Health, Care & Additional Needs Policy Committee. Under Charlotte's leadership that policy committee undertook an enormous amount of work. I'm delighted that Edwina Grant, DCS Lancashire has taken over chairing that policy committee as Charlotte becomes my Vice President. I am already working closely with Charlotte as we engage with central government on the pandemic and I am looking forward to continuing that close working with her.

Before I became Rachel's Vice President, I chaired one of the Association's policy committees and it was through that work that I was first exposed to the northern powerhouse that is the ADCS staff team. The team is small, and they work incredibly hard.

Last year, 2019, was a year of interesting anniversaries as we heard throughout the year. If you haven't yet had chance to do so, I would recommend reading the collection of short vignettes from former ADCS Presidents, reflecting on 30 and 15 years respectively since The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004. And what of 2020, will it be a year for interesting anniversaries too? Well, it'll be 50 years since the Social Services Act placed responsibility for adult and children's social care with local authorities instead of the Department for Health. It is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the novelist E M Forster. So what, I hear you cry? Well, perhaps Forster's most famous novel *Howards End* carries the epigraph 'Only Connect' – it is a novel much concerned with the relationships, and the possibility of reconciliation, between certain pairs of opposites: the prose and the passion, the seen and the unseen, the practical mind and the intellectual mind, the outer life and the inner. But the epigram has wider resonance for us today in that its instruction – only connect – is exactly what none of us can do at the moment, at least not within a two-metre radius. We have found other means of connecting, of staying in touch and of maintaining visibility on our most vulnerable children. And that brings me to my policy priorities for the coming year.

## Policy priorities

I shall maintain visibility on the need to level up (to coin a phrase) society to make it more inclusive, so that children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable feel a greater sense of belonging. This will be more important than ever as we deal with the aftermath of COVID-19, particularly as learners return to school and college. Being in school or college not only provides a protective factor for all children and young people, but it helps to engender an important sense of belonging to a school. This sense of belonging and inclusivity provides vital stability particularly for vulnerable learners. And that is why inclusive education and inclusive schools are so important. Good schools are inclusive schools. To mangle a COVID phrase – *'stay in school, protect your future, save your life chances'*. I'm not sure that the new (September 2019) school inspection framework quite had chance to look properly at school practice in relation to exclusions. Let's hope it will get back on track as soon as possible.

Feeling a sense on inclusion and belonging extends well beyond the school gates; indeed, it is essential that children and young people feel they belong in their communities too. This wider sense of belonging, of being connected and valued, and cared for in a supportive family environment not only protects children and young people from harms, but it also helps to build their resilience. And as we know all too well, resilience is a vital tool in the toolbox for young people, adolescents in particular, to protect themselves against potential exploiters, gangs, drugs runners and others. Although 'building resilience' was never overtly one of the five Every Child Matters outcomes (whoops, I've said it!), we know that in order to improve educational, health, wellbeing and staying safe outcomes we must work with young people to build their own sense of agency and resilience.

As I mentioned earlier, I fully intend to maintain visibility on child poverty and the imperative of tackling the practical and systemic issues so that children and families get the right help, at the right time. This is about entitlements colleagues. Children have a right to a decent standard of living not least because a decent standard of living promotes good outcomes in the round, but perhaps most particularly it promotes good physical and mental health and wellbeing.

I am more determined than ever to work closely with DfE, other government departments and with providers to achieve a national sufficiency strategy of placements for children in care including placements at home. I include in this the imperative of resolving our national and long-standing shortage of tier 4 placements for our most complex children and young people. To achieve placement sufficiency, we need to take a whole-child view. This is not solely about providing a decent, safe placement in which to live, it's about understanding wider support needs too – staying connected with family and friends, emotional support, physical and mental health support, an educational placement that encourages a sense of belonging. If the state is going to take a child or young person into care, we have a collective responsibility to try to meet a child's needs holistically.

Similarly, I am determined to ensure that a national placement sufficiency strategy considers carefully the accommodation and support needs of care leavers.

Do you remember those heady days before our lives and work became consumed with COVID-19 and we as a sector warmly welcomed the government's intention to launch a Care Review? I do, and in many ways the Care Review will be even more apposite when it does launch. This will be one of my key priorities for action when we return to a sense of normality. I am certain that the work of the Care Review will be a key part of the recovery work when the current crisis abates. It will be important for the Care Review to have a sharply focussed, clear aim of improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers. The aim of the review cannot be clouded by any sense of seeking to reduce the number of children in care *per se*; the trick

is to make sure we have the right children in care, at the right time, in the right placement with the right support. Necessarily this will involve a careful look at the host of issues associated with 'placements at distance'. In recent times we have seen an increased use of placements at distance, indeed we've seen increased use of unregulated and unregistered provision. To state the obvious if I may, both phenomena are driven by a lack of placement sufficiency in localities. Before COVID-19, there was much media and political interest in the use of unregulated placements for under 16s. I want to say again here that semi independent accommodation usually used by and for care leavers may be unregulated by Ofsted, but it is not the wild west where children are abandoned to their fate. These placements are locally monitored. There is some poor practice that we absolutely don't want to see, but unless the state accepts that it (not just local authorities) has a role to play in ensuring placement sufficiency across the country then local authorities will continue to be stuck between a rock and a hard place. It's time to address the myth that a market exists for placements. There's no true market because there's only one purchaser – so it's a monopsony not a market. Mergers and buy-outs by venture capitalists are actually contracting the number of providers in the 'market', this despite the increase in demand for placements. **It is time to act.**

It will be important that the Care Review seeks to engage in and actively promote a balanced narrative about the care 'system' – care works for many children. I'd love to see our Secretary of State acknowledging this fact, wouldn't you? Moreover, I would love to see our Secretary of State leading what I believe to be the essential cross-government input to the Care Review – this is about more than children's social care and the solutions do not all lie within the DfE's gift. It is our collective responsibility to prepare our children in care for adulthood, as it is the responsibility of every parent to do that for their child.

## **COVID-19**

I mentioned earlier some of the challenges that children and young people might face when we do return to benign times, as we surely shall. I want to flag a few more because I am worried about the pressures being stored up for us and what we might have to tackle, all of which comes on top of severely stretched and woefully under-funded children's services. I do recognise this is true across all public services as a result of a decade of austerity, but children and young people should not, must not, pay the heaviest price.

- Already we know that calls to Refuge's hotline for reporting domestic abuse are up many fold. We know that evidence from police forces in China during the COVID-19 outbreak there, that there was a three-fold increase in the number of domestic abuse offences during the self-isolation period. This is one of the myriad issues of deep concern to me and has been throughout my career. During my first week at work as a social worker, some 34 years ago, I moved a young woman and her children into a refuge. Their plight has stayed with me throughout my professional life
- I expect we will see huge spikes in demand across the children's social care spectrum. Referrals to children's social care are low at the moment, for obvious reasons, as the biggest sources of referrals, police, health and schools, are occupied elsewhere. I fear we will uncover new unmet need in the child in need space but more worryingly, in the child protection space. And, there is a very high probability that we are building up a backlog of new care applications which may result in more children needing to come into care
- Increased number of children and adolescents ensnared in sexual and other forms of criminal exploitation, recruited in gangs, because they have missed months of the protective factor that being in school brings. As we know from our police colleagues, we are already seeing early evidence of an increased demand within the online child

sexual abuse and exploitation domain, with children spending more time unsupervised online. This will inevitably lead to greater vulnerability to exploitation from perpetrators

- Increased incidences of children living with one, two or all three of the factors – parental substance misuse, domestic abuse and parental mental ill-health and emotional distress. This will generate even greater burdens on child and adolescent mental health services which were frankly almost at breaking point before COVID-19 struck
- Widening of health inequalities, impacting forcefully on people who live in deprived circumstances or areas
- Mental health and wellbeing is another worry for us and the effect on the vulnerable through increased social and physical isolation will be significant
- The importance of joint contingency planning, information sharing and developing appropriate checks and balances to ensure key multi agency safeguarding activity continues, is vital. This is where a DCS's local relationship with their Chief of Police will come into its own. Police colleagues are as committed as we are to remaining vigilant to the potential possibility of increased exploitation of vulnerable children and adults
- The impact of social distancing restrictions, and the closure of schools and colleges will have a lasting impact of children and young people. Young people are inventive and creative and have of course found plenty of ways of staying in touch with their friends and families. But, for some the enforced social isolation will be compounding and exacerbating their worries and anxieties. I am deeply concerned that we will see a sharp rise in the number of young people self-harming, or worse, that suicide rates will increase across the population.

It's not all doom and gloom. We have seen across the country some heart-warming examples of the wider children's workforce acting creatively and selflessly. We have seen citizens stepping up to help people in their communities. We've seen the extraordinary outpouring of gratitude for frontline carers. There's gratitude too for the 'hidden frontline', social workers, foster carers and staff working in children's homes and residential school setting. Sadly, only a couple of weeks ago we heard from one of our DCS colleagues of the first foster carer to die from COVID-19.

Local authorities are being called upon by government for advice and we are being listened to because we are experts. I have felt particularly gratified to see local authorities in action, doing what they do best – acting as leaders of their local place. As a DCS, I am also pleased but not surprised to see the reaffirmation of the strong partnerships that exist between the LA and schools. DCSs are statutorily responsible for improving the outcomes of all children and young people on their patch. We have seen this statutory duty in action every minute of the day over these last few difficult weeks, as local authorities bring together early years and school settings, regional schools commissioners and Ofsted, local voluntary sector partners with statutory agencies, community safety and criminal justice agencies to ensure that our safeguarding partnerships locally do not collapse under the strain. All of this shows clearly the vital role of the local authority in building, maintaining and strengthening local relationships in local communities. It's easy to overlook the importance of local people feeling like they belong, that they're connected to a place that cares about them and for them. Well done public sector!

I sincerely hope the spirit of working together continues long after the pandemic is over in the best interests of communities but, crucially, in the best interests of children and young people. I also hope that the DfE will review its own internal structural arrangements to eradicate the artificial divide, which only exists in central government, between education and schools and children's social care. The excellent close working and dynamic partnerships that exist between DCSs, RSCs and their teams and a wide range of school partnerships have been

built upon the strong foundations of the local authority as leader of place. I hope we will see this more integrated approach continue to pervade in the DfE.

## **Conclusion**

I am truly sorry that we are not all together in the fine surrounding of the Museum of London, as we should have been today. Thank you for taking the time to read this address. I hope you will also watch the accompanying short video clip (where I do not appear in my pyjamas...honest!).

Before I draw this address to a close, there is one more ADCS tradition I must observe. This would not be an ADCS Presidential address if it didn't mention money! So, let me be clear, short funding cycles hinder long-term planning and investment. I think we've seen a bucketful of evidence supporting that over the COVID-19 crisis. The announcement of extra funding for children (and adult) social care is welcome. But I just want to say loud and clear, **THIS IS NOT YET JOB DONE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES FUNDING** (yes, these capital letters do mean I am shouting!). We must work towards a sustainable long term funding settlement for children's services. Before the pandemic, children's services were woefully under-funded and stretched to the limit. The current crisis is significantly exacerbating that inadequate baseline of funding. The resources needed during the nation's recovery from the pandemic will be eye-wateringly large. I'm sure that the government will invest in its citizens' futures. I want to see unprecedented levels of investment in our children's futures, please.

We have a government with a large mandate and post-COVID, there is the real prospects of greater political stability than we've known for a while in the UK. This gives the government the opportunity to change its approach – to stop chasing the next shiny new thing and instead invest in children's services in a way that generates improved outcomes for children and families over a longer timeframe. Short term, single issue funding pots waste precious time in endless bidding rounds for small amounts of money when our core services for children and families are under-funded. I hope that the government will see that it cannot again allow public services to be denuded in the way they have been over the last decade.

I'm not sure Forster would quite have put it this way but... it is possible to reconcile what we may previously have believed to be irreconcilable opposites; exhibit A - private healthcare provision drawn into the NHS.

We have witnessed extensive interventions on the part of the state, might some of them prevail in the longer term as a legitimate role for a state larger than we saw pre-COVID? A recalibration of the social contract may even be in the offing – now that is something Forster would have approved of.

Thank you, colleagues, partners and friends, for taking the time to read this address. Keep up the good work you are doing for children, young people and their families.

Thank you.