

**Alison O'Sullivan's Presidential speech delivered Wednesday 15 April 2015**

I am so grateful for everyone taking time out of their busy diaries to be here today to mark the beginning of my Presidential Year and to listen to a few words from me. So, let me begin with some welcomes.

I would like to start with my family who are here with us today. This location is particularly apt as, in complete fulfilment of the stereotype, I am from a Guardian reading family.

My father who I am delighted can be with us today – by the way at the age of 88 he is delighted he can be here too - is a lifelong Guardian reader.

As a child I can clearly recall the daily reading of the “Manchester Guardian” (as it was called in those days). My father would take the newspaper to work every day to the Rolls Royce Aero Engines factory in Derby and then at the end of the day it would be used to wrap the rubbish, though I never quite understood why we did this. An article would often catch my mother's eye and she would push aside the food scraps to read it, so this simple task often became an extended business.

My husband, who has been a lifelong support and without whom I would never have been able to progress in my career, also provides me with a daily Guardian reading service!

I would like to take the opportunity to thank him for his tireless support and for the daily information he provides me with from reading the paper and his research and help in scanning the horizons.

I am absolutely delighted that so many familiar faces from Yorkshire are here with us today.

The Leaders of all Political Parties in Kirklees and my Chief Executive are supporting me in my presidency and are generously allowing time away from Kirklees to carry out my duties. I will carry with me in to this role all the creativity and energy I draw from Kirklees. Particular thanks to Adrian Lythgo for his encouragement and support.

Speaking of support, many members of “Team Kirklees” are also here today and I hope they know that I could not do my job without their help. Particular mentions must go out to the assistant directors, secretaries and the communications team – thank you for being here today.

And last but certainly not least, my colleagues from Yorkshire and Humber. A strong and mutual support network has grown across our region since the role of Director of Children's Services was created. We have a huge wealth of knowledge and expertise within the region and I feel privileged to have spent my entire career in this part of the world.

The reputation Yorkshire has for being direct and down to earth is well deserved. So as well as being an enormous source of support and encouragement I know that I can rely on my colleagues to tell me when I am wrong and what I should be doing that I am not. I also know that there is no danger that I will become “too big for my boots” over the next 12 months.

It is a huge privilege to occupy this role for a year but I am conscious that each president is a custodian of the Association. I follow in illustrious footsteps, most recently those of Alan Wood.

Alan has shown that we are not afraid to challenge as well as to collaborate. He has strengthened our working relationships with the LGA and SOLACE and spoken out boldly about the need for innovation - and the need for us to think and, crucially, act differently.

He will be remembered for many things. His passion and also his kindness will not be forgotten, I know he provided a great deal of personal support behind the scenes to a number of Directors going through a difficult time. He will continue to be involved with ADCS as the immediate past president and I know he will support me over the coming year as well.

So, some of you might be wondering how I came to be a Director of Children's Services, which by the way is the best job in the world!

Well, as with most things there was an element of chance.

I had no idea what I was going to do when I left school in 1973 and wound up taking an unplanned gap year. They didn't really exist back then but I took one and I worked as a volunteer assistant in an inner city social services office in Derby. I went out with the social workers to visit all sorts of people in all sorts of circumstances.

It was a time of industrial strife if you recall and that winter I was taken on as a Welfare Assistant and tasked with compiling a list of vulnerable people who needed coal delivered to them directly by the miners. Armed with a box of index cards containing details of all the closed cases, I set about visiting everybody to see whether they needed coal for the winter. I was essentially the forerunner of the winter fuel allowance payment that all pensioners receive today!

Although I was very young and inexperienced I was trusted to report any concerns arising during my home visits and it was at that point that I started to get interested in pursuing social work as a career. The rest, as they say, is history.

I studied at Bradford University, one of the then few prestigious degree courses for social work, which also boasts as its alumni from the same year, Shirley Tyson and David Behan, both of whom I'm delighted to say are here today (your secrets are safe with me)!

After graduating in 1978, I went to work at Bradford Social Services as a newly qualified social worker leaving 27 years later as Director of Social Services to join Kirklees as Director of Children's Services.

I didn't particularly plan that journey but what I found was a career that gave me great satisfaction and Bradford offered me the opportunity to grow and progress. I am delighted Kath Tunstall from Bradford can be here today – she embodies all that is best about Bradford – exciting and challenging as well as wise and supportive.

But it is not just what you do, it's how you do it. What will be my particular style as president?

I have lived in Yorkshire long enough to claim to be from there (perhaps!) and so I will bring the honesty, directness and a vernacular you would expect.

And I shall tap into the dispersed networks of experts that make up the ADCS membership because I am a great believer in the power of collaboration.

During my Vice Presidential year I sought to complement Alan's role by spending a lot of time listening and talking with our wider membership. I knew there was a wealth of knowledge and experience out there but the richness and depth of this and the passion I have seen firsthand has overwhelmed me. I am determined to make more visible the fantastic work being done in our regions particularly in the area of self-improvement. So you will both hear and see much more about this in the year to come.

So what are our priorities as an Association and what are my priorities as president?

As an Association we seek to influence policy makers and partners by offering the professional advice of our membership with the overall objective of improving outcomes for children, young people and their families.

And with the help of Sarah Caton and her team we draw upon the huge wealth of expertise from within our membership to do this.

There are several issues high on our agenda at the moment.

The first **four** are the subject of policy papers published during Alan's presidential year setting out our position and some clear asks aimed at the incoming government.

In terms of **Education** we are urging greater clarity around accountability and the role of local authorities in the system. Authorities in all parts of the country are struggling to deliver sufficient school places and attract a good supply of quality teachers. These issues must be addressed as a matter of urgency as we strive to raise the attainment of all children and young people.

The second paper focuses on the **early years**. We know that access to good quality early years care and learning gives children the best possible start in life, we need to, as a priority, help those most in need in order to make a huge difference to their life opportunities because as we all know, a positive early learning environment lays the groundwork for children to achieve well in school."

Third on **leadership** we are clear that there is a need for a single point of accountability for all children in a local area. And delivering that must be based on a single clear line of sight for how that accountability operates. It's our firm belief that the role of systems leader remains critical as we go forward – so much of our work to improve outcomes for children depends on collaboration with other agencies and with local people.

Our most recently published paper dealt with **inspection**. It is vitally important that the sector has robust and respected inspection and regulation systems. It needs to be proportionate, and give us an insight into the quality of services being provided in order to inform improvement plans. Critically it must also reflect the way that our services are organised and must keep up to date with emerging practice. We are urging the incoming government to ensure the arrangements we have are fit for purpose.

Beyond these areas the sexual exploitation of children and young people, mental health services and child protection arrangements are pressing issues for us all.

On **child protection** we believe that the 'expectation creep' in respect of LSCBs must be addressed. We need to have a good look at how these Boards operate and re-establish clear roles and responsibilities.

Effective interventions to tackle the scourge of **Child Sexual Exploitation** also depend upon clarity about respective roles and responsibilities a cross agencies at both Local and National level. Directors of Children's Services have a critical contribution to make to strengthen this work.

And **Mental Health Services for Children and Young People** are simply not yet good enough.

In my view, the fragmentation of commissioning has been the key problem, resulting in confusion about who is responsible for what. There are so many fingers in the pie it's not clear who is responsible. We must sort this out. In my view, local Health and Wellbeing Boards must be the focal point for ensuring the commissioning of adequate provision and the holding to account of providers.

Then there are at least **three more ongoing issues** that all local authorities are grappling with: managing demand; early intervention and prevention; and, the workforce.

Just to touch on these a little more, all parts of the system are grappling with **increasing demand**. This is driven by rising numbers in the population and increasing expectations and it is creating real pressures on budgets.

But it is also the case that current treasury spending plans were predicated on an assumption that spending on children's services would reduce over the lifetime of this parliament. For reasons which are well known, this has not happened. It is vital that planned spending for children's services in the next parliament is based upon the reality that the level of demand will continue to grow, particularly in areas of existing deprivation. As the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research, which published last November, showed us, there is a correlation between rates of referral, numbers of children subject of child protection plans and numbers of children who are looked after, and deprivation. This must be in view.

Linked to this is the issue of **early intervention and prevention**. There is a very real risk that because of reducing budgets the sector will forever lose significant capacity to intervene early to prevent the need for more expensive support for children and families later on. If this happens without regard for the long term impact we will have shot ourselves in the foot (or maybe even in the head).

And lastly, **workforce**. We have difficulties recruiting and retaining key groups of staff and sadly this does include social workers. The creation of The College of Social Work and the Chief Social Worker role has, for the first time, made the profession visible at national level. We must build upon this renaissance of the profession.

In the Yorkshire and Humberside region we developed a programme over three years ago designed to change the profile of children's social work and improve our ability to attract and

retain good quality staff. The Children's Social Work Matters campaign is unique and based upon collaboration between all 15 councils in the region. And this is making real impact.

But we also need to recognise and utilise the vital contribution of the wider workforce in children's services, the likes of our family support workers and youth workers. That's why I am delighted that under the leadership of Dave Hill, who is now our new Vice President, the Association's Workforce Policy Committee spearheaded a successful bid to the Department of Business, Skills and Innovation to develop four new apprenticeships in this area. We have high hopes about what this will contribute to the sector.

So, what brought me into that work in the first place and what still drives me and everyone I know in this business today is a deep passion for making a difference to people's lives. Social work is about fairness and tackling inequalities.

One of the privileges of being ADCS President is that you can champion issues close to your heart and for me that has to be improving support for children **leaving residential care**.

In families we do not cut off children just because they reach a certain age and as a mother of two sons in their 20s I know that young people have different support needs. That is why I would like to see the Staying Put scheme, which enables young people to remain with their foster carers until they are 21 if they choose, extended to include children in residential care.

Recent work commissioned by national charities scoped some models and estimated the cost at £80m, giving a sense of the scale of the investment needed. Of course it will be challenging and there are significant practical issues to overcome but I am convinced that the sector is up for it.

We know that the vulnerability of young people looked after in residential care is greater than those in the care system as a whole so surely we should be seeking to do the best we can for these, the neediest children in our care.

This bold goal brings me full circle.

I know my values are shared by Directors of Children's Services because we all want to make a difference to the lives of children and young people and especially to those who are most vulnerable.

As president of ADCS I have to play my part not only for children and young people of Kirklees but also across the country. And I know I will need the support of all of you too. It is a humbling thought and a big challenge. But one that I hope, we can rise to together. Thank you.