

Mr Chancellor,

When we hear the phrase, “the joys of childhood” – for most of us, this may evoke memories of happy times too numerous to mention. Childhood is, and should be, a time of wonder, where we can grow, learn and, above all, enjoy ourselves, free from responsibilities, safe and secure from harm. Our honorary graduand today, Anne Longfield, has made it her mission to nurture the true joys of childhood and as Children’s Commissioner for England, the role to which she was appointed in 2015, she has a wide and challenging remit through which to pursue this ambition.

In Britain today, almost one in three children experience conditions that blight their life chances - poverty, mental health issues, violence, parents with drug or alcohol addictions or life-limiting illnesses. The official statistics make bleak reading: nearly seventy thousand children in care, four million children living in poverty – which is likely to reduce their life expectancy by an average of six years. Cases of extensive and prolonged child sexual exploitation, as recently exposed in Rotherham, understandably shock and sadden us. There is precious little joy in the lives of these children.

Challenges of this scale require exceptional champions and Anne Longfield has thirty years’ experience of developing, influencing and shaping the agenda for children and families. Prior to assuming the Commissioner’s role, she was Chief Executive of the charity 4Children, which she initially joined in 1987 when it was the national Out of School Alliance. She oversaw its growth from a small set up operating from three dusty rooms in Bethnal Green, to a vibrant organisation with almost fifteen hundred staff and a budget of thirty million pounds. Anne and her team were responsible for the delivery of innovative

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and transformative services for over one hundred thousand children and families, accessed through one hundred and fifty local sites around the UK. Of the many initiatives she has sponsored, one that she remains extremely proud of, is the Sure Start programme. At its peak, Sure Start was running three and a half thousand centres around the country and represented the single major change to the lives of children and families over the last twenty years. The programme delivered practical, local support for families with children under five.

Anne was inspired to develop Sure Start by community centres she had visited in Sweden, which provided family focussed activities and support throughout the day and into the early evenings. She described them to me most vividly as beacons of light in the darkness. Throughout her work, Anne has been motivated by a sense that blue sky thinking must be grounded in reality - an approach which is evident in one of her current areas of interest, improving support for children with mental health problems. In seeking solutions, she has begun by focussing on the children themselves, to find out why they miss appointments or find it difficult to access support. If lasting improvements are to be achieved, she believes they must be designed with input from the people they are intended to support otherwise they will fail.

Alex Burghart, who has worked with Anne for several years, describes her as a stellar presence in children's services. He notes that there are very few people who can build a large, effective delivery organisation from scratch whilst influencing governments of different political stripes on high level policy. He also observes that she has a great sense of fun, is no nonsense and get things done!

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The Children's Commissioner reports directly to parliament and the role demands a potent mix of political savvy, dynamism, and steely perseverance. It may be a coincidence that one of Anne's favourite books is Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, which describes the consummate political strategist Thomas Cromwell's life at the heart of Henry VIII's government, but perhaps there are some communication techniques that withstand the test of time.

Anne is a Yorkshire lass, educated at Prince Henry's Grammar school in Otley. She came to Newcastle University in 1978 to study History with Politics and Philosophy. Reflecting on her time in Newcastle, which she very much enjoyed, Anne particularly remembers the strong connection between the City and the University, the rich sense of tradition, the human scale of the place and the friendliness of local people. I hope our audience will agree that these are characteristics which still define the Newcastle University you see today. She had no firm plans after graduation, other than knowing that she wanted to work with people. Indeed such was the appeal of the North East, Anne remained here for several months before moving to London to take up a post as a researcher for Save the Children.

Anne still remembers the shock she felt as a twenty-one year old graduate, encountering young people who, although they lived only minutes away from the Capital City, had never travelled beyond the bounds of their local community. One of the first things she did in her new job was hire minibuses to take them into and around London to help them to broaden their horizons by showing them what lay just beyond their doorsteps.

Anne Longfield's many achievements were recognised by the award of an OBE in 2000 in recognition of her contribution to children's services and in 2013, she was awarded the Freedom of the City of London for services to

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children in the capital. This latest honour means that, according to medieval custom, she is now entitled to drive her sheep over London Bridge. Whilst there is probably not a great demand for this in the modern world, it's good to know you could if you wanted to. You may be interested to note that the Geordie equivalent entitles you to graze your cattle on the Town Moor.

Pip O'Byrne, a friend and colleague who has known Anne for more than twenty five years, describes her warmly as someone who is dynamic, energetic, naturally optimistic, and loyal. She remains in touch with many of the friends she made at school and university. Whilst she can easily grasp the big picture, she never loses sight of what the individual thinks or feels and has a talent for building bridges between communities. She has a sense of creative optimism that makes her great fun to work with. Pip memorably describes Anne as “shaped by the hills that made her” – a lovely image that conjures up many qualities appropriate for her current role, not the least of which are strength, aspiration, and endurance.

Mr Chancellor, for her passionate, practical and personal commitment to transforming the lives of children and young people, I present to you Anne Elizabeth Longfield, OBE, for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, Public Orator

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