

Education Secretary addresses Centre for Social Justice

Good afternoon,

It is a pleasure to be here at the CSJ, and while it is a pity not to be joined by others, I am just glad to have the opportunity to talk about a subject that is all too often neglected by politicians in Westminster.

As the Cabinet Minister responsible for our public education system, can I start by saying a huge thank you to everyone who has worked so tirelessly throughout the pandemic supporting schools and colleges.

A key part of my role is also responsibility for family, and it is family that I have come to the CSJ, perhaps the home of family policy, to discuss.

There is no doubt that the last 12 months have put enormous pressure on home life and families.

But they have also reminded us of an eternal truth, that our families are almost always the best support mechanisms any of us have to fall back on.

Many people moved home during lockdown, to either look after their parents and grandparents, or be looked after by loved ones.

Many of us made a concerted effort during quarantine, to check in with our siblings, cousins and relatives who we otherwise speak with all too infrequently.

I saw first-hand as Education Secretary how parents juggled work and home schooling, so that their children could get the very best education.

This Government undoubtedly took the steps necessary to combat the virus and protect as many people as possible from both the public health and economic fall-out. That included supporting families through the furlough schemes that protected incomes and therefore household budgets.

Our teachers and frontline care workers were heroic, along with many volunteers manning queues at vaccine centres, supermarket staff, delivery drivers and so many people who worked throughout... I do not for one minute want to gloss over their achievements...

But we need to take a moment to celebrate and champion our mums, dads, brothers, sisters, children, grandparents and grandchildren... because so often they provide the helping hands, the shoulders to cry on and the kind words of encouragement at our lowest points.

Throughout the pandemic, we were not able to see our relatives, to hug those closest family members.

There will have been many reunions in the recent days, reminding us of the strength at the heart of our families.

So it is perhaps now, after this difficult time for so many, that you could argue that we have never valued the concept of family as highly as we do now.

We need to take this moment now, because I don't believe we talk about family enough in Westminster... we have perhaps lost the confidence to talk about family in a positive way and the positive contribution families make to our national life.

Too often we have surrendered to the language of statism, stuck in the tired pathology that Government intervention has all the answers to societies woes.

This could not be further from the truth.

Families have many of the answers and we must give families, in all their shapes and sizes, the chance to thrive without the need for state intervention.

This means breaking down barriers like allowing adoption for mixed race parents, encouraging flexible working hours, and working from home now a lasting change for many.

Let me start by asking: what does family mean to you?

I ask that, in full knowledge that the answers will differ, but every answer will emphasise how special family is even though it looks different to every one of us.

Since the 1970s fewer of us are getting married, the number of children growing up in single parent households has risen, and divorce continues to increase.

The structures of families have changed but the importance of family has not.

Marriages between same-sex couples have risen since it was legalised by a Conservative Prime Minister in 2014. We continue to be a nation of foster carers and adopters, providing loving families to children who have faced great trauma in their young lives.

Traditional family roles have also changed and adapted since our grandparent's generation: mums going back in to work and dads are expected to share childcare responsibilities.

We can certainly be proud that we have reached a new, more modern age of family life.

What has not changed – has never changed and will never change – is that being part of a stable, loving family is one of the best mechanisms for boosting life chances.

There is no substitute for the safety net and love that a family provides.

I know this first-hand, not just from having a loving wife and two amazing daughters, but from my parents who did the most generous thing anyone can do by becoming foster carers. In doing so, my parents gave my foster siblings a house to call home, support, and love, transforming their lives in a remarkable way.

And on a wider scale, the evidence is clear that if we are to increase social mobility and make this a country that works for all, we need to champion the institution of family at every opportunity.

Our own analysis of children in the care system found that children placed into adoptive families performed better at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 than those who remained looked after by the state.

Let me be clear, I am not saying that all families should be or need to be headed by two parents of the opposite sex.

The 20th century stock image of Mum and Dad with 2.5 children is now far less relevant as a model.

Whatever shape, size, or type of family you find yourself in, it needs to be supported, parents need to be empowered, and children must be given every opportunity to grow up in a happy and healthy home.

That is because while the family unit may have changed, reflecting society around it, families remains the first and most lasting influence on who we become in the world – driving our values, our passions, our pursuits. It is where we first experience the feelings of belonging and love.

And raising a family, whatever shape or size it comes in, should be the most fulfilling experience of any person's life.

I know that it can be filled with struggles and anxiety at times. I know how hard people work to make ends meet and provide for their families.

I make no apologies for thinking there is a positive role for Government to play for parents and their children at these points in their lives- because support is often too fragmented just when it is most needed. We should be doing everything in our power to support parents in carrying out the most important job they will ever have.

Government should be here to empower and equip parents, not to strip them of their role and responsibility. The last thing any child needs is for Government to take away a parent's rights to decide and responsibility to provide for their child.

So today I want to update you on what we are doing at the Department for Education and what my colleagues are doing in other Government Departments to help parents, support families and give children the best start in life.

I can announce today that we are pushing ahead with plans to support the growth of Family Hubs England. I have instructed officials in the Department to draw up plans to increase the number of Family Hubs currently in

operation.

A Family Hub is a place for parents to go, with their children and access help that might otherwise be too hard to find. They could meet health visitors, get access to classes on parenting and receive wider support.

I can report that we are already investing £14 million to champion family hubs, including launching a National Centre for Family Hubs, whose role will be to champion family hubs and spread best practice and evidence on integrated family service models.

I am pleased to announce today that the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families will run this national centre, and we expect it to be up and running shortly.

As well as making progress on Family Hubs, I have recently launched the Independent Review into Children's Social Care, appointing Josh MacAlister to Chair it.

Despite the incredible dedication of Social Workers, our care system too often breaks families up, splits parents from children and doesn't deliver the outcomes children deserve. Josh and his team will report back to the Government with plans to fix this.

I have also appointed Krish Kandiah as Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board. Krish is a real leader in the field of adoption and fostering, and I know he will bring fresh ideas to this area.

Too many children find themselves waiting for an adopter family, far too many children never find a placement. We need to do more to fix this.

I have already signed off continued support for Adoption Support Fund, and I hope to release the Department's strategy on adoption later this year as well.

We are not the only ones in Government doing our best to help families. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Andrea Leadsom published The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days.

Andrea has been a superb voice for young mums, dads, carers, and their babies, with a huge appreciation for how important these 1001 critical days – from conception to age two – are in creating happy and healthy children.

I look forward to working with Andrea to deliver the six action areas outlined in The Best Start for Life which I think will have a transformational impact for babies and their families.

My friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has done fantastic things with the new Reducing Parental Conflict Programme and leads on the Family Test. The Family Test was introduced back in the years of the Coalition and requires every Government Department to help assess the impact of plans for new or amended policies across government on family relationships.

What we all agree on, is that vulnerable families deserve to receive the right support, at the right time, to help them thrive. I was hugely pleased to see my friend the Housing Secretary re-launch Supporting Families earlier this year.

Supporting families demonstrates the way public services should work – with services joining up to ensure that more families get access to early, coordinated support to help them overcome their problems before they escalate.

Robust analysis shows that it is already working to reduce the number of families where children are needing to enter care, interacting with the criminal justice system or parents are unemployed. I look forward to seeing the programme build on its achievements in this new phase.

We do this because all families in this country matter.

Because while we can invest record amounts in education, as we have done and will continue to do, it means little if children and young people go home to a chaotic and turbulent household.

I hope one of the lessons we can take away from the pandemic is a reminder of how important families are in helping people achieve the most in life. In the history of human civilisation, no invention has better prepared our young people for the world and challenges life bring.

Every time Government legislates, spends, taxes, and regulates, we should think how this impacts families up and down the country. How does it strengthen the family and how does it support family life?

There is some way to go, but we have made a promising start.

I asked before what family is for you.

For me, family means being there for loved ones no matter what is happening in life.

It is this view that I want to take forward in my role as Cabinet Minister responsible for family. I hope you and others across Westminster and the country will join me.

Thank you.