

Education Secretary addresses Parliament on child safeguarding

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement following the sentencing of the stepmother and father of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes on Friday.

The whole nation is distraught at Arthur's tragic and horrific death. We, across the House and across this country, find it impossible to imagine how any adult could commit such evil acts against a child, in particular parents and carers, to whom children look for love and protection.

And I know that colleagues and people outside of This Place are seriously troubled that Arthur was subjected to a campaign of appalling cruelty and murdered after concerns had been raised with local services.

I want to tell colleagues across the House, and I want to assure the public, I am as determined as everybody is to get to the truth, expose what went wrong and take any action necessary to protect children.

To do so serious questions need to be asked.

I want to make clear that police officers, teachers, social workers, health workers and others go to work each day to try to make things better – to do their best at what are very difficult jobs.

Those already serving our country's most vulnerable children deserve our thanks – and I want to be extremely clear that no safeguarding professional should be the victim of any abuse. The targeting of individuals is wrong and helps nobody.

But that does not mean we should not seek to understand what went wrong and how we can stop it from happening again.

The public deserve to know why, in this rare case, things went horrifyingly wrong, and what more could be done to prevent abuse such as this happening again in future.

Since the horrendous deaths of Peter Connelly, Daniel Pelka and, sadly, others, the government has established stronger multi-agency working – putting a shared and equal duty on police, councils and health in local areas to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, alongside a role for schools.

I am sure Members across the House will recognise that improvements have been made from previous reviews, but the question now is whether that is enough.

In order to look at issues nationally as well as locally, we established the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in 2017 for cases like Arthur's.

That is why, given the enormity of this case, the range of agencies involved and the potential for its implications to be felt nationally, over the weekend I asked Annie Hudson, chair of the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, to work with leaders in Solihull to deliver a single, national, independent review of Arthur's death to identify what we must learn from this terrible case.

This will encompass local government, as well as those working in the police, health and education sectors.

Officials in my department are already in close contact with the Solihull Safeguarding Partnership, which is grateful for the support offered and agree with this approach as the best way to deliver comprehensive national learning and identify whether there are any gaps that need to be addressed.

Annie and her colleagues on the national panel who come from the police, health and children's services, have dedicated their lives and decades-long careers to bettering the lives of the most vulnerable children in our society.

And I have every faith that their review will be robust, vigorous and thorough. I have already assured Annie, as I assure you now, that she will be given all the support she needs to do the job properly.

This review will focus specifically on Arthur's case, and identify where improvements need to be made. But I also want to make certain we have looked at how all the relevant local agencies are working now, including how they are working together.

For that reason, I have also asked Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue services and HM Inspectorate of Probation to lead a Joint Targeted Area Inspection. I have asked that each of these inspectorates be involved because of the range of local services which had been involved in Arthur and his family's life during the preceding months.

These joint inspections are well established, but a new ambitious approach will be used, with a sharp focus on the entry point to the child protection system across all agencies.

This will mean we can truly look at where improvements are needed by all the agencies tasked with protecting children in the Solihull area, so that we can be assured that we are doing everything in our power to protect other children and prevent such evil crimes.

As part of this inspection, all the agencies tasked with protecting children at risk of abuse and neglect in Solihull will have their effectiveness considered, and instructed on where improvements must be made – both in Solihull, as well as where learnings can be applied in other areas around the country.

These inspectorates have met today to plan this work and work will begin next week.

I, as well as officials in my department and across government, could not be taking this more seriously and have been working this weekend to bring everyone together to make sure this work can start immediately. Over the coming days, we will publish terms of reference and timelines for this national review and local inspection.

Ahead of that, more widely, we are already investing heavily to help the legions of dedicated professionals on the frontline deliver the care that we all know every child deserves.

Since the Spending Review in 2019 there have been year-on-year real terms increases for local government – as well as the unprecedented additional £6 billion funding provided directly to councils to support them with the immediate and longer-term impacts of Covid spending pressures, including children’s social care.

Yet we have also known that the care system needed bold and wide-ranging reforms which is why we have the independent review of children’s social care happening now.

I know that Josh MacAlister, who leads the review, will make recommendations about what a decisive child protection response needs to look like given it sits at the core of the system he is reviewing.

And importantly, I know that the review will be looking at how social workers – especially those with the most experience – can spend time with families and protecting children, because we all know social workers do their best work with families, not behind a desk.

I look forward to the review’s recommendations in due course, because in any complex system it is important – imperative in my view – to investigate thoroughly to learn and improve the system.

My mantra continues to be that sunlight is the best possible disinfectant – because if we are to improve services where they need improving, we must share data and evidence.

Finally, I would like to thank the prosecuting barrister, Jonas Hankin QC, his team, and the jury, for their service in this troubling case.

As the court heard, Arthur’s tragic death is a result of the cruelty of his father and his father’s partner. No government anywhere in the world can legislate for evil. But we will take action wherever we can to stop this happening again, because we must do more, and to do more I would like to end my statement with a plea to everyone in our country.

Anyone who sees or suspects child abuse can report their concerns to local children’s services or by contacting the government-supported NSPCC helpline for adults or practitioners concerned about a child or young person.

So, if you see or suspect child abuse, report it.

If you are worried about a child you know, report it.

If something appears off, or you are seeing something that troubles you, report it.

As we uncover what went wrong and led to Arthur's tragic death, we must also strengthen our resolve to make sure that we prevent these crimes as much as they can be possibly prevented.

We must make sure that those who would do wicked acts to children face justice.

We must do absolutely everything in our power to protect vulnerable young children from harrowing and evil abuse.

And I commend this statement to the House.