

Health and Social Care Secretary NCASC Conference speech

Good afternoon – I'm grateful to the LGA, ADASS and the ADCS for bringing us all together for this timely conversation.

For me, one of the most poignant early moments in this role was hearing about Chris Dando and his team at Court House Retirement Home in Cheddar. Chris and his team of 12 moved into the home for three months throughout the first lockdown – protecting residents from the dangers of Covid-19.

It's the kind of sacrifice I know thousands of colleagues across social care have made through the pandemic – putting the safety of the people they care for over and above seeing their families, their friends, and even their own children. I can tell you, as a husband, a father and a son, I can only imagine what that feels like.

It's hard to find the right words to express the full extent of my appreciation and admiration for what everyone working in social care, and what they have achieved. I know there are tens of thousands of families around the country that feel the same way as I do.

We've seen social care colleagues take on some really heavy burdens. They've comforted people through terrifying times, sometimes taking the place of loving families at the bedsides of people as they sadly breath their last.

Equally, we've seen the continued heroism of our unpaid carers. The man shielding with his disabled daughter. The woman caring for her elderly father. They've confronted a time of unimaginable uncertainty with incredible compassion and grace.

And we've seen people in local government – people like you – pull out all the stops to just make it work. Just make the system work.

Together, you have been the very best of us. You make me and you make your country proud.

I've always believed that how we treat people who need care really reflects on our society.

In my University days – when as a volunteer for a charity at my University that was called 'Community Action' – I volunteer to visit a lady called Margaret in a local care home in Exeter. Perhaps it wasn't the wildest way to spend my youth, but it felt important. Important for her, because it helped her feel less lonely and isolated. But it was important for me – even at that age – because I learned so much more about the society that we're all a part of.

So it's humbling that it's now my job to work with you all, to tackle the challenges we face in social care. Challenges that are old and new: like how

do we pay for it? How do we staff it? How do we support an ageing population? And much else.

I'm sure of one thing: that we've never been held back by our lack of love or compassion. But it's no secret to say the system doesn't always work for everyone in it.

So the question for people like me – and people like you – is this: how do we improve the system so it matches the care and dedication of our workforce?

It's no exaggeration to say it's one of the most challenging questions of our time. So challenging, of course, that successive governments have ducked it.

But this government is determined to rise to it, even if that means making difficult decisions and delivering some difficult messages. That's just what a responsible government should do.

Because being serious about levelling up means being serious about social care.

There's no doubt, of course, it's complex. Anyone who says it's simple is kidding themselves. But today I thought I would reflect on three areas where I think we can really make the difference: in Funding, Integration and Workforce.

So, let's start with the money. Because we know we need big changes in this area.

Back when I was Communities Secretary – working with many of you, and it's good to be working together again – I pushed for the Social Care Precept and put money-raising powers in the hands of local leaders. And now, back in government, I've worked with No. 10 and the Treasury to take social care funding to the next level.

In September, we announced the Health and Social Care Levy, which will help put social care onto a more sustainable financial footing for the future.

We're putting £5.4 billion into the sector over the next three years.

And we're also giving councils around £1.6 billion of additional grant funding in each of the next three years.

More than that, many families across this country will have greater peace of mind knowing that we're capping lifetime personal care costs – bringing to an end the cruel lottery that so many families have faced.

But all of us know it's not just the money that needs to change, it's the way that we work too.

So the second area I want to reflect on this afternoon is Integration, and the changes we need to achieve more of that.

Now, sometimes conversations about integration can feel very abstract. There

are terms like “system working”, “seamless care”, and “person-centred health”. All of them hint – in some way – at where we’re trying to get to.

But if I had to put it in a more straightforward way, what I would say is this: I want to stop people from bouncing around the system. The integration between health and care is the only way I think we can achieve that goal.

So the reshaping of our health and care landscape – which is taking shape around us as we speak – has integration at its heart.

A couple of days ago, I did the Third Reading of our Health and Care Bill before parliament. It’s a uniquely important piece of legislation. It will mean integration by default; it will remove the rules and regulations that make sensible decision making harder; and it will boost accountability to the people who use health and care.

Supplementing the Health and Care Bill will be two White Papers. One on Adult Social Care and a second on Integration.

We’ll be bringing forward the White Paper on Adult Social Care very shortly. And today, I want to share some of the principles that will underpin it that particular White Paper.

First: That everyone has choice, control and support to live independent lives. Second: that everyone can access outstanding personalised care and support. And third: that Adult Social Care is fair and accessible for everyone who needs it.

Now of course, we’re not starting from scratch – we’re building on the best of the 2014 Care Act, but being unsentimental in leaving behind what hasn’t worked well from that Act.

And although today isn’t the occasion to set out the White Paper in detail, it is a good moment to pay thanks to everyone who’s played their part in shaping it, not least the LGA, ADASS and ADCS, alongside many hundreds of other organisations. The White Paper will be better for all your contributions – and Adult Social Care will be better for them too.

The second White Paper is on Integration.

Through the pandemic, so many places have shown what’s possible when people work together. We’ve joined-up on jobs. We’ve been smarter about discharge. And we’ve got data flowing where it needs to go.

So our Integration White Paper will build on all of that, setting out our ambitions on shared electronic health and care records and delivering digital services together.

It will also set out a more joined-up approach to the workforce. Not only do we want to make it easier for staff to move between health and care, but we want more joint roles across health and social care too.

And this spirit of integration runs through so many of our other pieces of

work. Like our Disability Strategy, and our Autism Strategy, for example. For too long, disabled and autistic people have found that public services often don't meet their needs. I want those days to be numbered.

A key way we're trying to change this is mandatory training on learning disability and autism – in health as well as social care. So, that's something we're already piloting.

It's yet another example of where we need to get to: a workforce that thinks and acts in a truly joined-up way.

This takes me to the third and final area I want to reflect on today: our incredible workforce.

Yesterday afternoon, the Prime Minister had the honour of hosting a reception at Downing Street attended by 50 front-line care workers. I think it's so important that people like him – and me – are recognising this incredible career path.

I think the pandemic has been an important turning point for social care. It's been the moment when the British public has truly begun to grasp the hardship and heroism that comes from a career in care.

We're now watching it on our TV screens, with Ed Balls' new programme on BBC iPlayer. And we're seeing it in advert breaks too, with our 'Made with Care' TV Campaign.

I think the adverts get it right. The energy. The variety. The rewards.

And I want to congratulate everyone involved with that campaign, because it's an important one. It's estimated there will be almost half a million extra job opportunities in adult social care by 2035 – with more than 100,000 current vacancies to be filled.

It's right that we're putting huge amounts of energy into getting many more talented and dedicated people into the sector. But equally, I'm determined for us to retain the brilliant people we already have.

Those of you who've watched that Ed Balls documentary will remember someone called Cameron. We saw how, even at only 19, Cameron had a natural gift for care. But knowing there's no clear career path for him has meant he's looking at a career as a paramedic or a nurse. We need to hold on to people like Cameron.

So we will invest at least half a billion pounds into the social care workforce over the next three years. Some of those funds will help us deliver new qualifications and better career routes in care.

We're also directing funds into stronger mental health and wellbeing support for care staff, because colleagues can't care for people unless we care for colleagues.

I feel confident about the social care workforce in the long-term – but of

course, I do recognise the challenges we face in the short-term – particularly the challenges of the winter ahead.

I know that vaccination as a condition of deployment is an emotive issue. I do get that. I'm clear that the first duty of anyone working in health and care is to avoid preventable harm to the people they care for. And the second duty, of course, is to keep one another safe, so they can keep doing their vital work.

I do recognise the challenges providers face to recruit and retain staff, and I'm going to keep working closely with you on all these workforce pressures this winter and beyond.

But our £162.5 million Workforce Recruitment and Retention Fund (WRRF) is making a difference. It's helping local authorities work with providers to boost staffing and support existing care workers through the coming months.

We've also got our Winter Plan. It learns the lessons of Sir David Pearson's review of last year's plan. It's backed by more than half a billion pounds of funding. And it's a product of some hard work across local government, the NHS, care providers – and many of you. I'm especially grateful for this teamwork at this very challenging time.

In a moment, I'm going to take some of your questions. But before I do, let me just say this. I think this is a moment for major change in social care – change for the better. Just as the NHS was born out of the adversity of the Second World War, this new era for social care can be a bright and exciting antidote to this dark and difficult period.

It won't be easy, of course. But nothing worth doing ever is. But by boosting funding, promoting integration and cherishing our workforce, I believe we can make a change that lasts generations and stands the test of time.

Thank you all very much.