

Minister for Equalities delivers International Men's Day speech

"Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker I am pleased to be standing at the Dispatch Box on International Men's Day. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting a debate on this important subject and I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members who have made heartfelt contributions today.

"I also welcome the member for Warrington South to her position as shadow Minister.

"International Men's Day is an opportunity to celebrate men and boys in all their diversity, and to shine a spotlight on the issues which affect men, from shared parenting to health and wellbeing.

"This Government is committed to levelling-up opportunity and ensuring fairness for all.

"As Minister for Equalities, I want to ensure no one is left behind, regardless of their sex or background. Both men and women in the UK benefit from us having some of the strongest equality legislation in the world. The Equality Hub will consider sex along with factors like race, sexual orientation, geography and socio-economic background so we can ensure we are levelling up across the country.

"This will support data driven policy to reduce disparity across the Union and make the UK the best place to live, work and grow a business.

"Levelling up is the mission of this government and every one of us should be free and able to fulfil our potential. The Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned the Coronavirus, which we all know is the biggest challenge the UK has faced in decades – and we are not alone. All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this disease.

"We know that men have been disproportionately impacted by Covid, and that after age, sex is the second largest single risk factor.

"However, not all men are the same, and not all men will be affected in the same way. My report into Covid disparities showed, for example that the job you do, where you live, who you live with and your underlying health, all make a huge difference to your risk of Covid.

"We recognise how important it is that each individual understands how different factors and characteristics combine to influence their personal risk. The Chief Medical Officer commissioned an expert group to develop a risk model to do just this, and DHSC are working at pace on how to apply the model.

"As well as the impact on lives, Covid has had a huge impact on Britain's livelihoods. Those livelihoods which give us pride and a way to support our

families.

“Because, of course, men and women do not exist separately and in isolation – we are part of families, businesses, and part of our communities. Which is why our support is targeted at those most in need and looks at how issues are impacting individuals not homogenous groups, so that we ensure a fair recovery for everyone.

“As a Treasury Minister, I am particularly proud of our comprehensive package to protect jobs, which the IMF highlighted as ‘one of the best examples of coordinated action globally.’

“We have given unprecedented support, as this house has heard time and time again, through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), to ensure people can get the support they need, especially those in sectors most affected by COVID-19.

“The members for Watford, Ipswich and West Bromwich East spoke passionately about mental health.

“The challenges this year have no doubt taken their toll on many people’s mental wellbeing.

“It is very understandable during these uncertain and unusual times to be experiencing distress or anxiety or to be feeling low – and we know this affects many men. These are common reactions to the difficult situation we all face. Anyone experiencing distress, anxiety, or feeling low, can visit the Every Mind Matters website and GOV.UK for advice and tailored, practical steps to support wellbeing and manage mental health during this pandemic.

“We know that some men are less likely than women to seek help with their mental health and some can be reluctant to engage with health and other support services. This is why I say to every man that the NHS is open for business. We really want to stress this.

“I would urge any man who is struggling to speak to a GP and seek out mental health support delivered by charities or the NHS. Services are still operating and it’s better to get help early.

“The NHS this week launched its ‘Help Us Help You’ campaign – a major campaign to encourage people who may be struggling with common mental health illnesses to come forward for help through NHS talking therapies, also known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, which are a confidential service run by fully trained experts.

“I would also like to remind people that the ‘Help Us Help You’ campaigns have sought to increase people coming forward with worrying cancer symptoms, including for testicular cancer and prostate cancer.

“I know the member for Bracknell spoke movingly about his friend who tragically lost his life and urged men to seek the help that they need, as did the member for Glasgow East.

"The current campaign will run throughout the winter to ensure that men feel able to come forward and get tested and treated early.

"I believe the honourable lady asked about rough sleeping. I just wanted to answer her question on what the Government is doing.

"On the 18 July we launched the Next Steps Accommodation Programme which makes funding available to support Local Authorities and their partners to prevent previous rough sleepers from returning to the streets. The programme comprises £161M to deliver 3,300 units of longer-term, move on accommodation in 2020/21. And £105M to pay for immediate support to ensure that people do not return to the streets.

"On 17 September we announced local authority allocations for the short-term funding aspect of this programme. £91.5M was allocated to 274 councils in England to help vulnerable people housed during the pandemic. And recently, on 29 October we announced allocations to local partners to deliver longer-term move on accommodation. More than 3,300 new long term homes for rough sleepers across the country have been approved and this is backed by Government investment of more than £150M. So as she can see there is quite a lot that is being done on this issue which we take very, very seriously indeed.

"Madame deputy Speaker I would like to close by taking a moment to celebrate the contribution men and boys make to our society. The member for Rother Valley talked about men and boys in his constituency feeling like they have been forgotten. It therefore seems opportune to celebrate our fathers and our sons, our brothers and our friends and indeed our colleagues this week, and the progress we have made in supporting them under this Government.

"For example since 2010 we have seen the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, allowing mothers and fathers to share the highs and indeed the lows of caring for their new babies.

"This Government is also committed to making it easier for fathers to take Paternity Leave, as set out in our 2019 Manifesto. And subject to further consultation, we are committed to introducing measures to make flexible working the default for men and women, unless employers have good reason not to.

"As someone who only came back from maternity leave this year myself, I can tell you Madam Deputy Speaker that my husband was able to take paternity leave and it made my return to work much easier, having two ministerial responsibilities as well as my work in my constituency. So this is a policy that I'm very very passionate about."

Phillip Davies MP

"Would the member also look to make it easier for absent fathers to actually have access to their children and to speed up the process through the family courts, which is often a tortuous one, which causes so much heartache for so many fathers?"

Kemi Badenoch MP

“My honourable friend is right and yes, this is something I think we can look into. I also want to recognise the work that he has done to raise awareness of fathers who feel a sense of alienation from losing access to their children. He will be pleased to see that the statutory guidance of the Domestic Violence Bill currently recognises parental alienation as an example of coercive and controlling behaviour – no doubt in part due to his representations on this issue.

“I would like to thank him and my honourable friend for Mansfield again for their tireless work on these issues, and for securing this debate today.

“I therefore pay tribute to my honourable friend, the member for Mansfield, for his vigorous campaign to support boys from white working-class backgrounds.

“He raised many issues about the way the Equality Act is interpreted, as protecting groups when actually what it protects is characteristics which we all have. I think some of his questions, especially about whether we should have a Minister for Women, are above my pay grade! But I think this is something that I will definitely raise with the Minister for Women and Equalities and with the Prime Minister on his behalf as well.

“I want to assure him that the Commission I sponsor on race and ethnic disparities is currently studying how we improve outcomes for these boys in the towns and regions of our country.

“I’d also like to pay tribute to the Equalities Whip, the member for Finchley and Golders Green, who rarely gets the chance to speak these days as a whip, for his successful campaign to get the HPV cancer jab given to men and boys. We’re very proud of the work that he has done.

“I am honoured to have taken part in today’s debate on International Men’s Day to mark the progress we have made, and to highlight what more needs to be done.”