

PM speech at positive opportunities reception

Good afternoon everyone, and a very warm welcome to Downing Street.

A little while ago I received a letter from a young girl named Zahra, who lives in East London.

Zahra – who I am very pleased to say is with us here today – is still at primary school.

But in her letter she told me she is concerned about starting secondary school later this year because knife crime in her local area means she does not always feel safe when she is out and about.

And she is also worried about her teenage brother.

“I don’t want him to be another statistic,” she wrote; “I want him to feel safe”.

As you can imagine, we get quite a lot of letters here at No 10.

But it is absolutely heart-breaking to read one like that.

The most important job of any government is to make sure everyone in this country is safe and feels safe.

And if there is such violence on our streets that an 11-year-old girl is scared of going to school, or worried about her brother being in the wrong place at the wrong time – that tells me we have to do better.

So we are making more than a billion pounds of extra funding available for the police, have tightened up the law on offensive weapons, and have set up a cross-government task force dedicated to tackling serious violence – I have just come here straight from its latest meeting this afternoon.

But by the time a crime has been committed, by the time a young life has already been taken, it is already too late.

If we are going to make our streets safer, if children like Zahra are going to feel happy going to school, then we have to steer people away from gangs and violence in the first place.

Every young person – regardless of where they live or what community they come from – needs somewhere to go, something to do and good people around them.

And that is why I am delighted to be hosting you all here today.

It has been a pleasure to hear first-hand about some of the great work being

done by the coaches, artists, teachers, business leaders and role models, all of you, in this room.

And, at a time when the headlines about young people are all too often bleak, it has been simply inspiring to talk to those of you who have benefited from that work.

Because what this event proves more than anything is that nothing is set in stone.

Nobody should assume that their future leads only one way, nobody should be written off as a hopeless case.

If, like John McAvoy, you can go from serving a life sentence for armed robbery to becoming one of our leading Ironman triathletes...

If, like Jamal Edwards, you can shatter the expectations of your teachers, your friends, even your family by creating a multi-million pound business...

If, like the people helped by Centrepoint who are helping out today, you can go from sleeping on the streets to working at Downing Street...

...then anything is possible.

And that is not only a powerful message for young people in communities struggling with gangs and violence – it is also a reminder for everyone in politics of the difference we can make if we support those people who are offering positive activities and alternatives.

That's why the government is putting almost £300 million into our Youth Endowment Fund and Youth Futures Foundation, making sure the money is there for groups and projects that can make a difference.

Because I do want this to be a country that works for everyone, where all of our young people – all of you – can grow up optimistic about their futures.

Where people are not held back by expectations – either their own or society's – about what can and cannot be achieved in life.

Every child is born with potential – we just have to make sure it's unlocked and allowed to flourish.

People here today are working hard to do just that.

So, on behalf of the whole country, I want to say thank you to all of you.

Thank you for making a difference.

Thank you for setting an example.

And thank you for making the UK a better, safer, stronger place not just for the young people here today, but for girls like Zahra, and her brother, and millions more like them right across the country.

Thank you once again for coming, thank you for everything you are doing, and enjoy the rest of the day.