

Speech: Children and Families Minister addresses ADCS conference

It is a huge privilege to be here to speak to you all and to have the opportunity to hear from this dedicated community of leaders. As the Secretary of State said to you all earlier – I cannot overstate the importance of the work you all do. And you have our heartfelt gratitude for it.

Six months ago, I was given what I now believe is the best job in Government. There is no other role that provides such a huge opportunity to change children's lives for the better.

When I look at my own life, it is clear to me that I could not have got to where I am today without the right support. As some of you may know, my family came to Britain from Iraq in 1978, fleeing a man called Saddam Hussain. I was from Baghdad, and I was ripped away from everything I knew and all of my friends. I was only eleven at the time. I couldn't speak English and found it hard to communicate.

My early education was a struggle. I remember hiding at the back of the classroom, desperately praying the teacher would not turn to me for an answer.

But week-by-week things became easier. And of course with a strong network of support around me, opportunities to thrive and a good education, I was encouraged to work hard, and fulfil my potential. Without this, my story could have been very different. And that currently is the harsh reality for far too many children. In my role, and yours, we have the opportunity to make sure that children get the support they need and get the chances in life that we look to afford our own children.

My focus to date has been on engagement. Listening and understanding the many strengths, but also the challenges of this sector. As I have travelled across the country, I have been blown away by the dedication of the DCSs, social workers, foster carers, and others who are all working determinedly to improve children's lives.

And I have heard directly from children and young people that social care has changed, or even in some cases saved, their lives. I should also say that I have heard a clear message, which I've heard again today, that funding is a real challenge. I want to acknowledge this, and say that I am listening – and I particularly want to work with you to understand the evidence for additional investment.

But we still have a long road ahead of us before we can honestly say this is the best system possible. Since 2016 you have been making real strides towards this goal, implementing the reforms set out by my predecessor Edward Timpson in Putting Children First. I am a big supporter of this strategy – I

believe we are building an infrastructure that has the potential to be truly transformational.

And I see my job now as one of implementation: helping to oversee this transformation but, more importantly, ensuring no barriers get in your way.

Today I want to talk to you about how we can achieve this. First, by ensuring we have a strong workforce and confident leaders in the system who can really drive change. Second, by seeing the sector work cohesively as one, using evidence and data intelligently to drive improvements. And third, and most importantly, by making sure we are ambitious advocates for our young people, and strive for the best outcomes for every child.

By far the most important factor for success is the people delivering it. Despite being the Children's Minister for six months now, I am still struck by stories from social workers about the daily reality for the families they support. That is why I am passionate about programmes like Step Up and Frontline; programmes that have raised the bar for social workers coming on stream, and promoted social work as a desirable graduate career. To build on this we have announced a further £25million in support of Step Up – funding that will bring a further 700 talented future social workers into a fantastic career path.

With the help of many of you here, and over 200 social workers, we have also created a world-leading National Accreditation and Assessment system. We've altered our approach following consultation and are now focussing very sharply on accreditation as a driver of learning and development against the knowledge and skills statements. Social workers have told me they appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise against a nationally set standard and I am delighted to see many of them are now putting themselves forward for accreditation.

And we are making great strides with Social Work England. I am delighted to have appointed Lord Patel as Chair and Colum Conway as Chief Exec, and look forward to working closely with them to ensure social workers benefit from the highest quality initial education, access to continuing professional development and experience strong, supportive supervision and leadership.

One thing we must not forget is the importance of that strong leadership, who guide, motivate and provide the conditions so that social workers can succeed. This begins with our Practice Leaders. I am really pleased to see we have 40 talented senior social workers now part of the Practice Leaders Programme, building our pipeline for the future. I was delighted to have a working lunch with a group of practice leaders recently, and their passion for the scheme, and insight into social practice shone through. I'd like to give a massive thank you to all of those involved in the scheme, and of course to the DCSs involved in its development.

And of course our DCSs are critical to the success of Children's Services. When I visited Doncaster in January following their transformation, I asked to meet the people on the frontline. I asked them: "70% of you are the same people that were here when it was failing, and in deep trouble what's

changed?" A man and a woman both said that the thing that changed was leadership. They trusted their new leadership and had confidence knowing they would be around. I think there is more that we can do to support you as leaders, and to help nurture the next generation of DCSs. You are the experts. I want to work with all of you to develop a strategy for supporting current and future talents who will make up our pipeline of leaders across the system.

A second pillar to making this system truly great, is building a culture of continuous and evidence based improvement that drives better practice and outcomes by working together as a sector.

We can draw inspiration from the Regional Improvement Alliances. This budding partnership between DFE, ADCS and the LGA has demonstrated the benefits of a collaborative approach. Since their inception, we have already seen local authorities having more honest and evidence-based conversations about strengths and weakness with each other, but more importantly gaining access to the support they need.

However, there is still more we need to do to strengthen performance. This begins with using a key resource you already have – data. I am pleased to see ADCS making ongoing progress with this in developing a core data set that highlights where we must pay the greatest attention. Of course, I must put a caveat on this, data on its own only describes change.

However, it can prompt you to ask the right questions and paired with an honest conversation about the drivers of change, it can give you the greatest insight into your own performance and what ought to change. On a recent trip to Hampshire, I saw first-hand how using a smart data tools fundamentally improved the way they worked. By honing in on trends and outliers, the data prompted informed conversations between DCS and his teams about performance and the right direction for improvement. This is a fantastic example of using resources effectively to drive improvement. I want to see this happen across the country.

I also want to see all Local Authorities sharing 'real time' data so we aren't putting more risk into the system by second-guessing where problems may lie. It is easy to get in the habit of marking your own 'marking' or 'homework' because it's more comfortable to criticise yourself than to be challenged by others. But if we genuinely want to improve performance, we must be seeking challenge and direction from our peers, experts and those who can provide support. This means sharing with your Regional Alliance, and the departments Regional Improvement Leads – who are all standing ready to get you the support you need.

Data is not the only form of evidence of course. Putting Children First set out a clear ambition to improve the quality of evidence from good practice. Since then there has been remarkable progress, and there are now almost 100 projects funded through the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. Clearly, better evidence and improvement go hand in hand when it comes to providing the right initiatives. In the first year of delivery, Hertfordshire's Family Safeguarding project for example has trimmed an

estimated £2.6 million from their annual expenditure, whilst still improving outcomes for children.

The collective evidence from round one have helped us identify seven core features of practice for strong children's services, which when used together as part of a comprehensive change programme, have produced strikingly good early outcomes. We cannot, and must not ignore this evidence. And I set you a challenge to ask yourselves whether you are embedding these seven features in your local areas.

The new What Works Centre will be integral to disseminating this learning. This "bank of great evidence" will help identify the elements of best practice which really do work in a way that is accessible and I hope user friendly. And today I get the pleasure of welcoming the Centre's founding Chair, your former president, Sir Alan Wood. We are all aware of the dedication Alan has shown, only matched by his impressive success driving improvement across the country. He is a perfect candidate to lead the way in bringing our WWC on stream.

And of course, in embedding improvement there is also a role for nationally funded services that support all local authorities. For many years the department has funded life-changing family support services, which offer advice and guidance to the most disadvantaged families. I am pleased to announce that the Department will continue to invest in these services, and has today launched a reprocurement to make sure that families continue to receive this support.

I want to close with a few words about the weightiest pillar and key responsibility that I have as children's minister, and that each of us in this room shares: the responsibility of parenthood. I have fought hard, when I've needed to, to make sure that my own children have the opportunities that I want them to have. And this Government believes firmly in the power of opportunity.

We all know that for many children opportunity is, I'm afraid elusive, and there are many obstacles in its way. It is a parent's job to be the fiercest advocate for our children. And that includes those children for whom that baton of parenthood has been passed to us. Children who, for all sorts of reasons, cannot live with their birth family should not be deprived the opportunities that we would want for our own children. Indeed I want looked-after children to have every opportunity to enjoy their childhood and to thrive into adulthood.

The government has done some incredible things for the children for whom we are the corporate parent. Staying Put has transformed the experience of so many young people who have grown up in foster care, letting them maintain crucial relationships and a place to live for much longer. I hope that Staying Close will do the same for young people leaving residential care. And through the Corporate Parenting Principles and your 'Local Offers' local authorities are able to affirm their commitment to these children and young people.

Care works. I am proud to be responsible for a system that has been shown to help children recover from traumatic experiences and often to succeed against the odds. But the children's social care system cannot do it all. I see it as my job – as our job – to make sure they are all working in the interests of our children and young people.

Of course they need a high-quality placement with well-trained carers, and local authority support in childhood and beyond. Sir Martin Narey's Foster Care in England report confirms that foster care is working, but we should all remain concerned about the instability that characterises the lives of many young children. I will respond soon to that report, setting out how we will support children and their foster parents to provide the stable lives and opportunities we would want for our own children.

But a young person's success is driven by a multitude of factors and actors. I want the other parts of the local council, the school system, the health service, the local leisure centre and even the companies (or government departments) where they aspire to work one day to be catering for the needs of our children. Why shouldn't they? As a parent, I make damn sure that my children are getting what they need. Why should it be different for a corporate parent.

Today I am promising to work for these young people and their futures. To make sure that looked-after children and care leavers can benefit from the good things that this country has to offer. They can get into, and stay at, the best schools; they can take up apprenticeships or places at university if they want to. My own department has shown the way in Whitehall, setting aside roles for care leavers in our Civil Service internships scheme which we're rolling out across the civil service. I've been lucky enough to benefit from a fantastic new member of my own private office.

There is a limit to how much we can offer alone. That is why I am so excited to be launching the Care Leaver Covenant this autumn, and I'm standing on the shoulders of giants by bringing Edward Timpson's idea to life. The Covenant is a pledge from organisations across our society, in which they make concrete commitments to help improve outcomes for care leavers.

They might offer training, job opportunities, services or anything else they can offer to help young people move from care to independence. It represents a partnership between the best of the public and private sectors to provide support that will champion our most vulnerable children. And my ask of all of you today is to do all you can to encourage your local businesses to be ambitious in what they can offer to support our future generations. I met earlier with Andy Burnham and encouraged him to do what he can in the Care Leaver Covenant here.

I said earlier that I believe that Children's Minister is the best job in Government. When we talk about tackling the burning injustices facing society – the answer lies, to a significant degree, in this role. This is why we must work as partners, to bring lasting change to the system and to fight for the best possible care, opportunities and education for our young people.

I believe that if we can get it right for our most disadvantaged children, we can get it right for every child.